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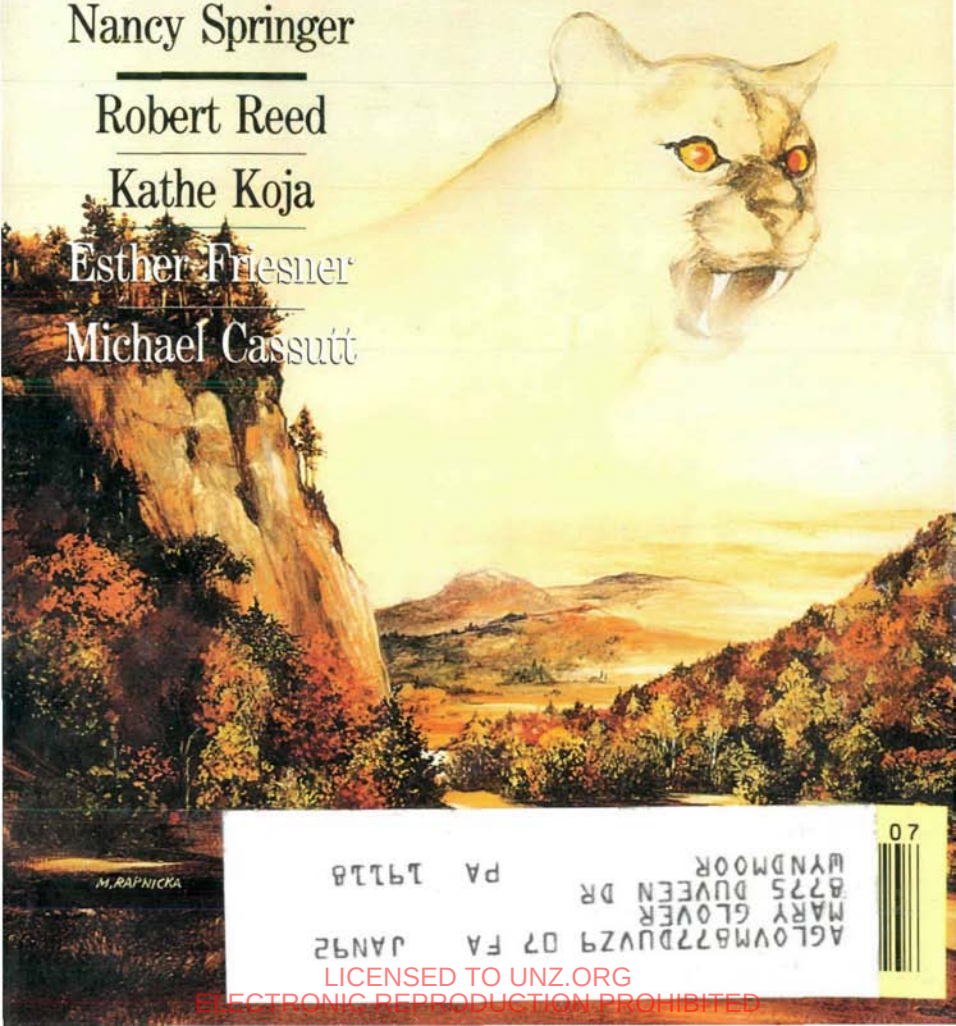

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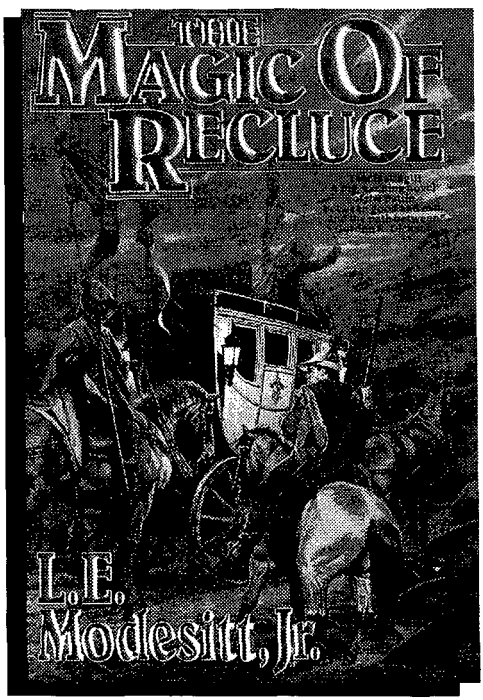

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Editorial

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

A FRIEND ONCE told me that she envies my sense of history. By that, she meant my knack for being able to see the past all around me. I have lived in Eugene long enough to remember when the two-story Station Square Building was a pile of rubble, a parking lot, and a flower shop on the verge of collapse. I absorb people's histories the same way: often seeing them as they are now with the person they were overlaid on them like phantoms.

I feel the weight of history tonight.

I spent the evening digging through piles of books and magazines, looking at references to *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* in anthologies, collections, and histories of the field. I dug through Dean Wesley Smith's collection of *F&SF* (most of which he bought from John Varley — see how the history crops up?) and read introductions written by Anthony Boucher, Robert Mills, Avram Davidson, and Edward L. Ferman. I held digests in my hand that had aged ten years longer than I had, and I read the issue that dates from the month of my birth from cover to cover.

So much history in this magazine, more than I could ever imagine.

And some of it is personal. I bought copies of *F&SF* whenever I could find it. My earliest memory of the magazine dates from my twelfth year. I bought a copy on my family's annual pass through Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and read the entire issue, although I understood less than half of it. Seven years later, *F&SF* became the first magazine my husband and I subscribed to in our fledgling (and ill-fated) marriage.

I met many people who are now my friends by reading their work in the magazine's pages. And I screamed for joy the day that Kevin J. Anderson, then the only other aspiring writer I knew, made his first professional sale to this magazine.

It took me even more years to make my first sale to *F&SF*. I'll never forget that day. October of

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1987: I had walked home from work in the crisp autumn sunshine. Inside my mailbox, I found three manila envelopes (signifying rejection) and a small envelope from Cornwall, Connecticut. My subscription renewal? But hadn't I paid it? I opened the rejections. Two were from *F&SF*, and one made a cryptic reference to an earlier manuscript I had sent. Puzzled, I opened the subscription renewal. And stared, shaking, for a good fifteen minutes. The news was too good to share on the phone. I drove across town and thrust the envelope at my friends so that we could all shake together.

Little did I suspect that almost exactly three years later, Ed Ferman would call me and ask if I would consider applying for the job of *F&SF*'s editor.

And now I sit, in my office in the foothills of Oregon's Coastal Range, contemplating the future by looking at the past. Downstairs are the manuscripts that Ed has already bought — the "inventory" — for lack of a better word. Wonderful stories that by the time you read this will already be set in type and scheduled for an issue of the magazine. I've just started buying stories that were sent to Oregon instead of Connecticut. (Please note on the masthead — our editorial address is now different.) My future, your past. An odd sort of history —a kind of magazine time warp.

In the next few months, you'll be experiencing another sort of time warp. You'll watch the magazine shift, brick by brick, story by story. Not that I plan any major changes. But editing is a personal thing, just as writing is. Even though Ed and I enjoy the same writers and have, I believe, similar theories on what fiction is and can be, we are different people. That difference will crop up in subtle ways — a fleeting thought *(I've never seen that kind of story here before)*, a new author, the appearance of a long editorial ramble where before there was none.

And some day you'll walk by that corner of your mind where *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* resides, and realize that it looks a little different. Someone added a cornice and stained glass windows. Or, perhaps, remodeled the room in the southeast corner. I promise to make the changes structurally sound and in the best possible taste. I value history, and yet I embrace the future.

Come walk with me across the pages of a magazine that has always shown us the future while letting us keep everything that is precious about our past.

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Michael Cassutt's "Extraordinary Measures" uses science fiction to examine what can happen when we preserve the past while moving into the future. Michael's last story in this magazine was "Curious Elation" (September 1990). He just edited an anthology of Catholic tales with Martin H. Greenberg and Andrew Greely. Michael spends much of his time these days as a producer on ABC's WIOU. We hope he'll still find the time to do more strong stories like this one.

Extraordinary Measures

By Michael Cassutt

YOU WOULDN'T REMEMBER the ambulance, of course. I was pretty young myself, nothing more than a kid in the neighborhood, really, more concerned about being on the downhill side of summer vacation than about the problems of two grown-ups in the house across the street.

All I knew was that she was named Jeanine Hannas and she was pregnant. And that he was named Craig and he was losing his hair. You'd see them walking in the evenings now and then, both of them so wobbly that cars were always stopping to offer them rides. I think they may have taken them toward the end. I know they stopped walking.

It was a hot August, bug weather. Green scum would appear overnight on any body of open water bigger than a puddle. The only relief morning brought was that you could see how miserable you were. We had central

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air, which helped a little, which is why I was in the kitchen when Mother said, "That can't be a good sign."

She was nodding toward the street, where an ambulance had pulled up in front of Craig and Jeanine's. "And she's not due for a month yet."

By the time we reached the street, we had been joined by Mrs. Detrick, who had a baby of her own on her hip, and Mrs. Linden. "Why don't you all wait here?" my mother said, literally sprinting into the house.

The women talked in sign language, I guess, while I just jammed my hands in my pockets and wondered what I was supposed to be thinking. Then the front door opened, and the attendants brought out the gurney. It wasn't Jeanine that was on it, however: it was Craig who got lifted into the back of the ambulance.

I looked at Mrs. Detrick, who was in the process of exchanging a surprised shrug with Mrs. Linden. Right about then Jeanine came out with Mother.

At sixteen, I was as focused on surfaces as the next kid. The image that still remains is that Jeanine had a blotchy complexion. Tears were pouring from her eyes with such ferocity that she actually couldn't wipe them away. And she waddled. But her voice was clear: "I'm going with him." She tried to climb into the ambulance.

Mother turned to the nearest attendant, who obviously had no more idea about what to do than I did.

Suddenly we all heard Craig say: "Jeanine, get out of here!"

The attendant came alive then, springing into the ambulance — "Make him lie down!" — as Jeanine told Craig he wasn't going anywhere without her.

Mother stepped in. "Jeanine, stop this. You'll hurt the baby."

I couldn't help seeing what happened next. I had a view inside the ambulance as Jeanine blinked tears, then tenderly stroked Craig's face. She whispered something to him, then allowed Mother and the attendant to help her out.

Presently the ambulance drove off down the street, moving at a speed more suitable to a hearse. Jeanine stood there and watched it, until Mother steered her toward her door. "Get some rest. I'll take you to see him this afternoon."

So began our involvement with Jeanine Hannas.

* * *

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I knew then, but didn't care, that Craig and Jeanine had lived on Sunnyside Street for something like a year. Craig was an attorney, but not the kind you see on television. He administered contracts for the Department of Water and Power. Jeanine was an accountant until she went on maternity leave. They were both from the same South Bay suburb and had come to Los Angeles together. They had been living in an apartment about one step up from crack alley until they could save for the house and the kid. After moving in, they had been doing some remodeling, keeping to themselves. They had become friends with the Detricks — doing some baby-sitting for them in kind of a dress rehearsal for parenthood, I suppose.

What none of us knew was that Craig had been ill for years with some mutant form of Hodgkin's disease. Apparently it had been diagnosed when he was still in high school. I remember how that shocked me — that someone my age would be in a position to be told, kid, you're not likely to live as long as you thought. I didn't know anybody like that, not then.

He had had chemotherapy, initially, and the disease had gone into remission for several years, only to flare up again when he was about twenty-four. It went into remission a second time for a few more years, until shortly after they moved to our street.

As promised, Mother took Jeanine to the hospital that afternoon, and the next day as well. Jeanine's OB/GYN, hearing about Craig, insisted that Jeanine come to see her immediately. But the only available appointment was during one of the two afternoons Mother volunteered at the nursing home. There wasn't what you'd call a big pool of replacements. Mother started to tell herself — and me — that Jeanine was pregnant, not disabled, and thus perfectly capable of driving herself to see her doctor. Besides, Mother was beginning to get a little nervous about how she'd thrust herself into the Hannas's situation. "Jeanine's probably getting sick of having me interfering," she told me.

"Yeah."

"It's not as if there's anything I can do. There was nothing any of us could do for Mrs. McMahon, was there?" Mrs. McMahon was the woman a block over who had died of cancer in April.

"Uh-uh."

"Of course, she was in her sixties." It's hard for me to picture it, but at the time this happened, Mother wasn't even forty years old. You're forced

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to make a whole different adjustment when a person younger than you is stricken. "Still, no one should be alone."

Somehow it developed that I gave Jeanine a ride to the doctor.

THE FUNNY thing was, I didn't even have my license. I had a learner's permit, which required me to have an adult in the car with me. The fact that Mother blithely gave me the keys to the Mazda without reminding me of this limitation convinced me that she was a lot more upset about Craig and Jeanine than I knew.

Her doctor's office was in a tower attached to Cedars-Sinai, a fifteen-minute drive away. Thank God the traffic was light, because neither of us had much to say to each other. I've gotten better since, but saying anything beyond a basic, "Hey, how're you doing?" required a bit of preparation. Especially since I already knew what her answer would be. What we talked about was where I was supposed to turn right to get into the proper parking structure and could I park close to the elevators.

It was the kind of waiting room that had *Elle* as well as *Highlights*, so I was happily occupied for the forty-five minutes the checkup took. Then Jeanine emerged, looking somewhat relieved. "All done?" I said.

"They want me to have an ultrasound and a fetal heartbeat," she said. I must have gotten a stupid look on my face. "You can come along, you know." So I did.

The technician was a cheerful black woman who showed Jeanine to a room. When I hung back, she said, "You, too. I need you." Jeanine was already hopping up on the bed, so I was stuck. And stayed even when Jeanine's maternity dress went up, a sheet went across her hips, and the technician spread jelly on her belly. There was a roar from the speakers as the ultrasound slid across Jeanine. "Know the sex yet?"

"No," Jeanine said, her head turned toward the screen.

"You want to know?"

I don't know why, but Jeanine looked at me. "Yes."

"It's a he."

Suddenly there were tears in her eyes again. And she took my hand and squeezed it.

The baby was a boy; he was in the right position, ready to drop, as they say, with a good, strong heartbeat. It should have been wonderful news.

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Jeanine looked as though she'd been hit by a truck.

We were done with the tests. Jeanine had had to use the bathroom, then she tried to call Craig in the chemo ward two towers over. After a moment she hung up. "He's sleeping now," she said, as if that explained everything.

So she had this news, and she couldn't even tell him. "Do you want to wait awhile—?"

"I don't think so."

"—Because I'll wait as long as you want—"

"No! No," she said. "That's sweet. You and your mom have been saving my life. But that's not it." She sighed. "They want me to do something. Apparently they've got this project going with UCLA, some goddamn experiment where they freeze rats and then unthaw them. . . ." She held out her hands, as if to say, Isn't it obvious?

"They want you to freeze Craig?" She nodded. "I didn't know they could do that."

"I'm not so sure they can." She started to say something, stopped, then started again, quietly. "He isn't going to last another month. He might not even last another day."

Mother resumed the role of good neighbor to Jeanine, and I got ready for school to start. It was junior year, and there were lots of very important things to worry about, like making applications to colleges, getting my license, and seeing if maybe I would have a date at some point. There was no change in Craig's condition and no news of Jeanine, until, one night, Mother mentioned that he had gotten worse, and Jeanine had elected to enroll him in the UCLA Cool Sleep program. That was September 5th, 1990.

On September 27th, Harper Craig Hannas was born at Cedars. Jeanine's mother and father had come up from Torrance to help, so there was no immediate need for us to be involved.

While Craig Hannas slept, cool or not, an earthquake devastated much of Los Angeles (not enough, some people said: it grew back). The Moscow Stock Exchange opened. Seven hundred thousand people, many of them women and children, died in regional conflicts. The Freedom Space Station didn't get built, and the European Space Agency sued NASA for $5 billion, breach of contract. The Tampa Bay Buccaneers won three

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Super Bowls in a row. From 2 million to 4 million, depending on whom you listened to, starved in Africa. Elvis stayed dead. I managed to get a date and a little bit more, graduate from high school, and earn acceptance to the University of Colorado, Boulder. Harper Craig Hannas rolled over, began to sit up, toddled, spoke a few words, and went to school.

In June 1996, I drove home from Boulder on my way to the University of Texas, conveniently forgetting that California was not on the way to Texas unless one was circumnavigating the globe. I had three weeks before med school started, and I, of course, spent it wisely, drinking and staying up until four in the morning. Mother and Father, for whatever reason, chose to pretend this was just like old times, which *I* chose to pretend was Post-Quake Trauma. I woke one afternoon around two and decided to have my Wheaties on the front stoop.

The neighborhood hadn't changed much. Some of the bigger cottonwoods had been casualties. Sunnyside had been resurfaced, because there had been some liquefaction associated with an underground parking structure a block over. A couple of families had emigrated, but no one had been killed.

The only activity on this warm afternoon in June was across the street at the Hannas' house. Harper was out there, all dressed up, which struck me as odd — some kind of summer school? Then Jeanine came out, equally dressed up. She got Harper into the car, then glanced toward me. She gave a little wave and went around to her side of the car.

Then she stopped. She turned back toward me. I was already ambling down the sidewalk. "You graduated," she said, a bit reproachfully.

"Hey, I had to. My lease was up."

"Your mother says you're studying medicine."

"Biomechanics, actually. Where machines and medicine meet."

As I reached the driveway, I happened to reach down for *USA Salvation* and noticed that the name on the subscription label was still Craig Hannas. There was something sweet about that.

"Mom." Harper was getting impatient.

"Big plans?" I said.

"We're visiting Craig." As if there were nothing unusual about it.

"Oh."

"You've never been, have you?" Knowing full well I hadn't. "Want to

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come?"

So I got dressed and went.

I had kept up on changes in Craig's situation through Mom. How the research kept coming close to a cure for his illness, but not close enough to risk reviving him. How the project had seven other "clients" in addition to Craig. How it had almost lost its funding in 1994, meaning it would have to revive all eight of them, ready or not, until the threat of an Assembly bill got the maintenance funding extended. For a while. Me, I'd have taken a rifle up on a tower about then. But Jeanine managed to handle it. At least, driving to Westwood she did.

Harper seemed bored. I suppose that was fair. Who was Craig to him other than a face from an old video? Or a name on a newspaper.

Craig and the rest of them were in the corner of a basement of some sprawling research institute named for a dead actor. It took longer to walk there from the parking lot than it did to drive there in the first place. It wasn't a bad setup: eight icees in a room, all the fluid control and systems monitoring done automatically. There wasn't anybody around (Jeanine had a pass card). I think maybe someone came in once a week to dust them off. It wasn't cold, though, which made it all the creepier.

"What's amazing to me is how little he's changed in six years. I look at myself in the mirror, and I've got smile lines now and the occasional gray hair, and I just look different. But he still looks like he did when we were first married."

"You know what they say about men getting more distinguished while women just get older. . . ."

She laughed. "Maybe that's it." What was sort of interesting to me at that highly inappropriate moment was this: Jeanine was rather attractive. I mean, to hell with the smile lines, and what gray hair? She was slim and pretty and funny. I wanted to put my arm around her.

Fortunately, I did nothing of the kind. I don't know; maybe it would have been smarter than what I did do, which was ask, "Jeanine, how the hell do you stand this? Do you really believe he's coming back?"

Harper, who had been examining the faces of the other clients, backed off a step or two, as if to give Jeanine room to wind up and slug me. But she didn't. "It isn't a question of whether he's coming back. He never left. He's right here. As for how I can stand it. . . ." She blinked, but there were no tears. She looked over at Harper, then back at me. "Sometimes I can't."

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* * *

When we got back to the house, Harper, still wearing his good clothes, vanished. I suppose if I'd been a six-year-old boy whose "father" was more like a chunk of Baskin-Robbins Lite Sherbet than a human being, I'd have been in a hurry, too. And if I'd been his mother, I'd have let him.

We found ourselves alone in the living room. It was 4:30. There must have been a lull in the takeoffs out of Hollywood-Burbank, since the only sounds were those of cars stuck on the freeway in rush hour, and — surprisingly — of children playing in the street after school. Jeanine slipped off her shoes and asked me if I wanted something to drink. I followed her into the kitchen.

Pouring a couple of Diet Cokes in the kitchen, Jeanine looked even prettier. Maybe because she'd taken off her shoes. Knowing I shouldn't, I leaned down to kiss her. She responded. Then: "I'm sorry."

"It's all right," she said, trying to convince herself. We took our drinks and went into the den. I think I may have slipped my shoes off by this point. I sat down on the couch. She sat down, too, and this time she kissed me. "I'm sorry," she said.

"It's all right."

Then she closed the door.

It wasn't the greatest sex I've ever had in my life (though it was pretty good for 1996). However, it was easily the stupidest. Part of me kept wondering when Harper was going to come home. Another part of me kept wondering when *Craig* was going to come home. Fortunately, the other parts of me were otherwise occupied.

There was less afterplay than there was foreplay. The highlight was when I blurted, "I'm going to Texas."

She closed her eyes, then she laughed. "I hope it wasn't something I said."

"I mean—"

"I know what you mean. Look, we're both grown-ups. The fact that we fell on each other like animals doesn't mean we're going to register a pattern at The Broadway. Of *course* you're going to Texas. And I'm going to stay right here and try to be a mother and a businesswoman and whatever kind of wife I can be." She buttoned her blouse and brushed back her hair. "That was where you were supposed to reassure me that

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I'm a wonderful mother and a successful businesswoman and that two out of three isn't bad."

"Oh." It really wasn't my day, conversationally speaking. "I guess it's my turn to say, 'I'm sorry.'"

"It's all right, she said. "It's been six years, you know. You weren't the only one. You weren't even the first."

Not to keep you in suspense, but nothing like that ever happened again.

WHILE CRAIG Hannas slept, the hole in the ozone over the Antarctic got bigger. Five hundred thousand people died in regional conflicts, and another 3 million starved here and there, depending on whom you talked to. The aliens didn't come. Elvis stayed dead, and fewer people cared. The Japanese space agency NASDA and its Soviet counterpart Glavkosmos completed a six-month circumlunar mission as prelude to a manned visit to Mars. The National League finally adopted the designated hitter. The average age of an American citizen reached, and passed, fifty-five. Mother died; Father moved to a place in Indian Wells. I graduated from the University of Texas and interned in Houston, then joined the staff of UC/Irvine Medical in Orange County. Harper Craig Hannas rode a bike, broke a wrist, kissed a girl, wracked up Jeanine's car, and matriculated at Osaka/LA.

On September 24th, 2011, I attended a daylong seminar on Invasive Nanosurgical Procedures at the Disney Sheraton. I had some free time late that afternoon, so I took a cab over to the old neighborhood. It was close to a big mistake: the driver spoke no Spanish, and I could tell before we even turned north from Ventura Boulevard that the Australian root beetle or whatever the hell it was had devastated the eucalyptus. The street had as much visual charm as a shaved dog. And there was worse:

We had sold the house in '99 after Mother's death. Within a year, it had been torn down in favor of a structure that looked more like a beehive with corners than a home.

It was the Farsi style, all the rage back in the early Nots. Now it had an obvious bad case of the ten-yearlies. The paint was peeling, there were cracks in the fake plastic siding, and the minaret actually shuddered in the breeze. A strong gust of wind would probably have launched it.

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Fortunately, that particular architectural disease had never penetrated into the neighborhood beyond the entry wound. The other houses were recognizably the same. Even some of the faces I saw were merely older versions of the ones with whom I'd grown up.

I had paid off the cab and was walking, when a car pulled up beside me. People don't drive cars as much now as they did in the last century. Not in Los Angeles, anyway. So it startled me. What startled me more was that it was Jeanine Hannas. "Take a wrong turn?"

"I was hoping you'd offer me a ride."

"Depends on where you're headed."

"Is that muffin place still in business?" Her house was all of thirty yards away, but neither of us wanted to revisit the scene of the crime. Even though it had been years.

"It's been a long time since you were in this neighborhood." She smiled. "Get in."

We wound up at a stand that served oxygen and clean water. When I slipped the kid on duty a hundred pesos, he let us have some coffee from his private stash. "Why are you still living here?" I asked Jeanine.

"Because it's home. My clients are here."

"You're the only Anglo in the Valley."

"I suppose I could be. I never noticed." She toyed with her coffee. We didn't say "aged" in those days: she had "improved" nicely. There was gray in her hair, and she was kind of fleshier, overall, but that was the fashion. You couldn't plug into a magazine without being reminded that all the best people were gray and sixty. "Craig is in the Lankershim Hospice." She nodded toward the building towering in the east.

"How many does this make?"

"Places he's been? Five."

"Are the others with him?"

"There are four left, all told. The other four have come out, you know."

I must have known. I mean, cool sleep was tangentially related to my work, since putting human beings into what was then called semicoma made it easier for biomechanics to plug in new parts. "How have they done?"

"We weren't close," she said tartly, suddenly reminding me that she was, in fact, in middle middle age. "They lived. They were recognizably the

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same people, after therapy. Although who would really know?"

"How's Harper?" In fifteen years I had learned to change the subject. Brighter. "He's getting married."

Where is he these days?"

"Miami."

"Of course. Nice girl?"

"Very reasonable." Her personality or the dowry? I decided to change the subject again, when she said, "I still see him, you know."

"Craig? I imagine."

"Not just at the hospice. I see him every time I talk to Harper. I see him in the house. I still find myself using phrases he used to use. We grew up together, you know."

"I know."

"I suppose I should have just tried to forget him, to live my life as if he had died. But that always seemed so unfair.... Craig didn't drive me away. He didn't fall in love with somebody else. He just had the bad luck to get sick. I suppose that's love."

"Extraordinary love." Then I had a thought. "Jeanine, why didn't you ever have yourself cooled? You could have waited for him."

"You know, I considered that years ago, when I finally realized Craig wasn't coming back tomorrow or this week. But I was afraid. It will be tough enough for him to come back, assuming he does. And he's doing what he has to do. It wouldn't be the same for me. I'd always know I had made a *choice*. And let's face it, after a certain point, it makes no sense. I'm forty-seven. Biologically, he's still twenty-nine. Should they keep me cooled for eighteen additional years, so we could be even?"

"Does anyone ever tell you what the chances are? Of Craig coming back?"

"They stopped years ago. I don't even ask. I hope they find something, of course, but I'm beginning to hope that it won't be until after I'm dead." She glanced at the clock. "God, look at the time."

While Craig Hannas slept, Mars was found to have been inhabited by tool-using creatures — 500 million years in the past. The Thirty-sixth Amendment to the Constitution made it a federal crime to blaspheme. The average human life span reached eighty-nine, except in Africa, where it fell below forty. Much of Los Angeles returned to the desert from

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which it had come. National Fox Broadcasting, the last "free" television network, folded. A RealTime Survey showed that less than 11 percent of the adult population (which was, in fact, *most* of the population) remembered who Elvis Presley was — and half of them thought he had been lead singer for the Beatles. Father died. My wife and I raised two children and stayed relatively happy in Orange County. Harper Craig Hannas graduated from college, spent a year in the Service Corps, then, like most of his contemporaries, transitioned to a job that involved keeping aged Baby Boomers alive and well.

On September 27th, 2021, Craig Hannas woke up. And for the first time in the thirty-one years I'd known her, Jeanine Hannas called and asked me for help.

I'd been expecting to hear from her, if only because I knew that in the past year, the FDA had certified a whole series of genetic replacements for various leukemias, including Craig Hannas's mutant form of Hodgkin's. My wife had even seen a brief local news item mentioning that Craig had been transitioned from cool sleep to a state of semicoma, as various new inhabitors began to flow through his formerly frozen veins. Everyone understood semicoma: by 2021 it was the common sentence for various youthful (i.e., anyone under forty) offenders.

In her call, Jeanine looked bruised (some last-minute cosmetic surgery, I later learned) and sounded lost, almost desperate. Well, something must have been wrong: it was seven o'clock on a Sunday evening, hardly the ideal time for the release of a patient, especially one who had not been conscious for almost thirty-one years.

I managed to catch the last metro north, booking a car during the trip, and drove the four miles from the station to the house with an increasing sense of dread. I had turned forty-seven that summer; my biochemical practice was not setting records, but was supporting me and my family. My contact with Jeanine had been limited to Christmas cards. What was I doing here? Being Mother's son, I suppose. Or working off the residual guilt from a moment of passion now twenty-five years past. A little of both.

"Harper will be here tomorrow," Jeanine said, getting into my car. "And I've put this off long enough."

It was assumed that I would drive. Well, I had done it before. Jeanine was silent on the drive while I calculated that Harper and his father would be almost the same age, physiologically.

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By prearrangement (there were reporters waiting) we used the service entrance and took the elevator to the minimum-security floor, which is where the hospice administrators had thoughtfully placed Craig.

There was less drama than I expected. The doctor in charge of the case, a woman named Andie Ashiki, walked us around a corner, and there, visible through the window, was Craig Hannas — alive, upright, and awfully young.

He and Jeanine embraced. I wondered what it was like, going to sleep in 1990 and awaking thirty-one years later. Was it dream-filled and peaceful . . . or an endless nightmare? From what I knew, dream states of prisoners in semicomatic suspension were carefully monitored (and probably manipulated), but Craig had effectively been on ice.

We were introduced. "The skinny kid across the street."

"Now a fat doctor from Orange County," I said.

He laughed a bit too loudly. He turned to Jeanine: "Whom do I see next? My high school English teacher?" In the time it took to speak that sentence, he had gone from hilarity to anger.

"Nobody else," Dr. Ashiki said.

Craig closed his eyes. Then he opened them. "Tell me one thing: Did the Cubs ever win a World Series?"

I managed to tell him that they had beaten Hiroshima in Not-Seven, while Jeanine wept real tears. Whether it was relief that her husband was back at all, or disappointment that he wasn't, quite, I don't know.

In any case, I'm afraid that was as good as it got.

NOW THAT Craig Hannas was awake, he got busy. First of all, he had thirty-one years of family business to catch up on. Jeanine found it difficult enough to deal with the various media and celebrity visitors; it was the personal callers who made life hell.

Then there was the little matter of a job. Jeanine's brokerage was prosperous enough to support both of them, and there was financial support for Craig's participation in the FDA program, but money wasn't the issue. What was Craig going to do with his time? The city was technically required to take him back in his old job — that had been an interesting development — but he would have to be extensively retrained. He didn't even know what the Department of Water and Power was *called*, much less where it was, and what it did. Besides, he had taken that job

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only as a transition to something more exciting corporate law, perhaps, or even politics. But now, given the gaps in his social vocabulary, he'd have been better off moving to a new field entirely — something like particle psych.

Finally, he was engaged in the serious business of getting well. The treatment performed on him while he lay in semicoma had stabilized his condition. It would take months or years to actually reverse it — we rarely use the word "cure." It would have been difficult enough to arrest Craig's illness under normal circumstances. But he had literally been frozen and thawed and God knows what over three decades. Some of his parts needed replacement, and so I joined the team of consulting physicians.

No matter how busy Craig Hannas got, Jeanine stayed a little busier. She not only had to maintain her own personal and professional life, but she had to help Craig with his considerable adjustment. If her previous situation had been much like having a loved one in a coma, the new situation was closer to raising a child with a learning disability.

Oh yes: there was the matter of Harper. His arrival had been delayed by the birth of his first child, a daughter, within the past month. That situation provided a mutually agreeable excuse for Harper to shorten his visit when it became clear that he and Craig had nothing in common except Jeanine, who managed to modulate the strain that developed almost instantly. Well, one of them was dealing with a complete stranger who happened to be his son; the other was dealing with a contemporary who was technically his father.

Beyond that, I don't know what went on inside the house on Sunnyside. Did Craig and Jeanine fall into their old rhythms? Did they sleep together? Did they fight? When I was a boy, a reporter would have found out and told us. But that had been a different time. My brief as Craig's doctor was limited to his physical state, and such psychological data as Dr. Ashiki cared to share. And she shared very little.

Six months after Craig's release, I got another call from Jeanine.

We met at what had been the oxygen-and-water place on Ventura, which was now selling Lunarian cuisine, which was precisely as bad as I expected it to be — meaning it was in the upper third of what had ever been offered at that location.

Oddly enough, now that we had a professional involvement, our

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personal contacts — never frequent — had ceased completely. Yet the talk was all about Craig and Harper, Craig and his search for work, Craig and the fate of the universe. . . .

"It's getting boring, isn't it?" she said.

"I can hear about Craig's life from the other doctors. They don't tell me much about you."

"All right. I'm fifty-seven, I've got a business and a granddaughter and a thirty-year-old husband who not only needs me to wipe his bottom, he's seeing another woman."

"Your business is terrific; you're a beautiful grandmother. Two out of three isn't bad."

She laughed. "I'm glad to see I had some influence on you." She was silent for a moment. "Christ, I feel like the one who's been frozen for thirty years. I never know how I'm supposed to react anymore. Do I say, Boys will be boys, and laugh this off? Do we have that confrontation scene and then the reconciliation scene? Maybe I should just divorce him." Her lips pressed together. "Maybe I should just kill him."

I chose to respond to the earlier statement. "Are you sure about Craig?"

"Do I strike you as someone who gets excited without a reason?"

Well At that moment she did, but I didn't say so. "Do you know who she is?"

"Dr. Ashiki."

"Oh." That was the best I could do. Thirty seconds earlier I would have sworn on a stack of Korans that there was nothing going on between Andie Ashiki and Craig. Now that the suggestion had been made, however, certain behavioral clues made it fairly obvious. The fact that Craig, unlike any other patient in the history of medicine, never missed his appointments with Ashiki and seemed to look forward to them. The really startling amount of time they had spent traveling together, not all of it necessary. And this damned secret voice they seemed to use on each other. I mean, *something* was going on.

"I'm going to take some consolation in the fact that she's also an older woman." Ashiki was thirty-nine and, to be fairly brutal about it, not high on anyone's list of attractive women doctors. All I knew about her personal life was that she was not currently married. Which was a description suitable for half the population.

"Well," I said, "assuming that it is true, you've already laid out your

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options. You can end the marriage and move on. Make a new life."

"I should have done that in the first place. I should have let him go. My Craig *died* in 1990, and so did his Jeanine. But that won't work. Because Craig is too good."

"Your definition of good is pretty relaxed —"

"—I'm not talking about being weak. Making mistakes. God knows both of us have made them. But my Craig, the Craig I loved all these years, won't let himself move on. If I confront him, he'll destroy himself *and* his little doctor trying to put things back the way they were."

"Don't confront him."

"Then he'll confess." Looking at it like that, she was really stuck. I thought again about that list of options, not forgetting the one about killing him. "I want you to do something for me," she said.

Doctors can do what civilians can't. They can take extraordinary measures.

Within ten days, by the week of November 15th, 2021, Craig Hannas began to manifest systems of a recurrence of Hodgkin's disease. Upon orders from Washington, Dr. Ashiki suspended the genetic program. On Tuesday, November 23rd, 2021 Craig collapsed unexpectedly. By December 1st he had been placed in a first-stage semicoma.

While Craig Hannas slept, the human settlement at Oceanus Procellarum was severely damaged in a conflict with another settlement at Tranquilitatis. The Anglo population of Southern California dropped to an all-time low of 23 percent. Enhanced humans (those with biomechanical modifications) were allowed to compete in the Olympics, but were still banned from Major League Baseball. The Japanese government made plans to settle central Africa now that the plagues had burned themselves out. The most powerful economic group there — descendants of Palestinians — announced that it had, in fact, no need for a country of its own. I underwent several voluntary biomechanical improvements, at ages fifty-three, sixty-three, and seventy. On April 23rd, 2050, the day of the fifteenth anniversary of her marriage to a Mr. C. R. Howdek, Jeanine Hannas died. She was eighty-six, and she had declined biomechanical enhancement.

* * *

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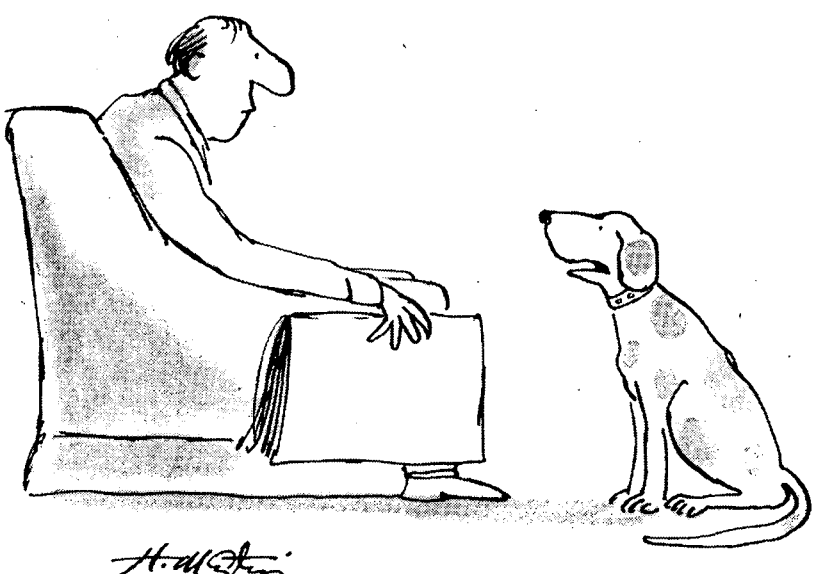
In reading this, Harper, you should find the answers to your questions, and Craig's, if you decide to share them with him. (I regret having induced his "relapse," but there was no organic damage, only mechanical alterations and manipulation of data. Had I actually poisoned him, I would have been found out.) No excuses; explanations.

Remember, in my grandfather's day, they would have gone to separate bedrooms. Mother's contemporaries would have gotten a divorce. But from the very beginning, Jeanine and Craig had to make up their own rules. Theirs was an extraordinary situation.

"She must have come to hate him," you told me.

Look, Jeanine was human. She required forgiveness; I think she was willing to give it. You see, she hadn't wanted me to kill Craig . . . just to see that he slept again until she was dead. So he would be free to live his life.

Call it extraordinary love.



"I can talk, sure, but to talk intelligently don't I need a college education?"

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Larry Tritten is a frequent contributor to this magazine. His fiction and nonfiction work have appeared in a variety of publications, including Playboy *and* Writer's Digest. *The following story is a cautionary tale about courage and one man's pursuit, so to speak, of adventure.*

Travels with Harry

By Larry Tritten

HARRY DANIELS WAS a terrifically cosmopolitan person who had, however, never set foot outside of his country or even, with rare exception, his city. Reflecting on his failure to do so, he often likened himself to George Bailey in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life.* George Bailey had yearned to leave his small town of Bedford Falls, but whenever he'd been about to do so, a situation that called for a responsible decision to stay had prevented his leaving. In Harry's case, it wasn't responsibility that kept him, but procrastination and indecision. When he was twenty, he got a passport, which he carried in his shirt pocket in restaurants and bars, savoring the thrill of its exoticism while pondering his imminent trip to Europe . . . or somewhere. He ended up going to college instead, and the passport became a relic of personal memorabilia. In the meantime, Harry was a world traveler vicariously. He devoured spy novels set in the Bahamas, Dubrovnik, London, and Moscow, and subscribed to magazines like *National Geographic, Travel & Leisure,* and *Arizona Highways.*

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Out of college, Harry planned a trip to Hawaii, but before he could leave, he got a job as a desk clerk in a big hotel, and the trip was put on hold. At the hotel, Harry found himself watching people show up from all parts of the country and world. He quietly served them while envying them all, and in the meantime, he never got any farther from Chicago than Omaha, which he wasn't sure counted. But as a reader, he was constantly traveling, and on the walls of his studio apartment, there were posters of the golden-roofed Potala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet; a lush, palm-lined beach of one of the Maldives; and a luxury ocean liner pulling away from the dock with a storm of serpentine confetti coming down on the crowd seeing it off. Harry was a knockabout world traveler in his dreams.

Which made him chronically wistful.

Then one day, M. Bazzaz showed up.

A slight, sad-eyed man with the complexion of parchment, he arrived at the hotel one day wearing Travel Fox sneakers and a black suit worthy of a fundamentalist preacher or Transylvanian count, and carrying a single small, dilapidated suitcase that might have belonged to a DP or refugee. He checked into the hotel, paid cash for a room for a week, and stayed resolutely in it for a week, sending out twice a day for the Continental breakfast and meals of soup, cake, and pie. After the week was up, M. Bazzaz was asked if he would be staying, and said yes; he continued to order the meals, but made no attempt to pay for them or the room. After two days of this, Harry was given the unpleasant task of going up to his room to set him straight.

Harry knocked on M. Bazzaz's door, not very firmly, since he felt a little awkward.

After a few moments, a voice said indistinctly, "Who is it?"

"Sir, I'm with the hotel."

"Ah."

"Sir?"

"Yes, eh?"

"Could I talk to you, please?"

The door opened, and Bazzaz's eyes morosely appeared. "Yes?"

"Can I come in?"

"Ah." The door opened all the way. Reluctantly, Harry felt. Bazzaz crossed to the TV set and turned down Alex Trebek's voice. "Yes?" he said, without looking at Harry.

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Harry looked around the room. There was only the small suitcase in one corner and, beside the bed on a stand, two books: *The Cake Bible* and *Fabulous Fruit Desserts*. He said, "The management asked me to see, if you're staying, uh — how. . . ."

"To pay, eh?"

Harry smiled flatly, and nodded.

"Sir, I have no more money."

Harry raised his eyebrows.

"But I don't want to go."

Harry wondered what to say.

"I'm from a bottle, and this is much more *comfortable*."

"A . . . bottle?"

"Yes. Djinn."

Harry thought he'd said *gin*, but being well-read and veritably cosmopolitan, realized abruptly it was *djinn*, which was a variant of *jinni*. Genie.

"Genie," he said.

"Yes, sir. Escaped. But, finding me, you can wish. . . . Not for much. No jewels, gold, power, long life. My powers are small. A trip is what you may get."

"A trip?"

"I have Bermuda, Shangri-la, Pittsburgh. . . ."

Harry tugged at an earlobe. "*Shangri-la*? It isn't *real*!"

"Try it."

Harry sighed.

"Los Angeles, sir? The sky like lilac, a nice Persian word. A moon like halvah. Women with hair the colors of copper and lemons, spiky and twisted."

Harry was enjoying visualizing such New Wave women, but remembered suddenly the task at hand, which was suddenly twice as unpleasant. Bazzaz was a nut, to be sure, but a curiously likable one — yet there was nothing he could do in favor of a guest who wanted to stay but couldn't afford to.

"If you want to stay but have no money, I don't think the management will allow that," Harry said, deferring the blame.

Bazzaz shrugged. "Well. Still, would you like the trip? Argentina, maybe? See Iguazú Falls, where thirty rivers meet and plunge over cliffs. Stand in the water mist, you are surrounded by the rainbows — lilac, blue,

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and yellow arches everywhere while the water thunders."

"That sounds great, but—"

"The Maldives, maybe? They are on your wall, yes? The ocean looks like emeralds illumined, the beaches—"

"*How did you know that?*" Harry said, startled.

"Djinns know."

Harry took a long breath and looked warily at Bazzaz, who then said, "And in your dresser there is . . . collection. Flags of the World cards. From gum: 1970. You have all but Tunisia and Romania. Would you like to go to either?"

"There's no way you could know that," Harry said, staring at Bazzaz.

"Correct. Djinns know, though."

Harry paced to one end of the room, then back. "Wow!" he said.

"Big Apple?" Bazzaz suggested. "You will love Manhattan clubs. Neo-tomorrow decor. Glass ceilings, vinyl couches, neon floors. You may bathe in light."

"I — I'd love to go just about anywhere," Harry said. "Uh, except Omaha. . . . So, what do you do?" he mused. "Snap your fingers and transport me?"

"Tickets. This is the twentieth century, yes? I am like . . . what you call a travel agent."

"Suppose I chose Shangri-la," Harry said. "I would get a ticket? On what boat or airline?"

Bazzaz smiled. "That is a special. Choose it and see."

Harry stroked his chin thoughtfully. Winter was just around the corner in Chicago. "The Caribbean would be fine," he said.

"That is it?"

"Sure," he said impulsively, surprising himself. "A trip to the Caribbean, yeah."

"In your pocket."

"Huh?"

Bazzaz pointed to Harry's coat pocket. He felt the pocket and withdrew an envelope. Inside was an American Airlines ticket to San Juan. Round trip, the date open.

"This is unbelievable," Harry said, which sounded both inadequate and trite, but certainly right on the money.

"Pleased?" Bazzaz asked.

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"Dumbfounded," Harry said.

"Maybe, then, tit for tat, you will make the management sympathetic with me."

Harry sat down on the bed and stared at the ticket, then looked at Bazzaz. "You don't have any money?"

"No, I have no job. Thence, no money."

"That's a problem," Harry said. "They'll want the money, and that's that." After a few moments, he said, "What about getting a job?"

Bazzaz smiled painfully. "I don't know. What can I do? I have only experience of being bottled hundreds of years."

Harry was at a loss for encouraging words. He kept staring at the ticket, feeling altogether outlandish.

"Can you not help?" Bazzaz persisted.

"I'll do what I can," Harry said, knowing that it amounted to virtually nothing. He sat for a while in silence, then got up and said, "I'll go down and talk to them . . . *But*. . . ."

Bazzaz grimaced.

Downstairs, feeling dreamlike, Harry told the manager that Bazzaz was broke, and even as he sought something sympathetic to add, the manager was on his way upstairs, eyes narrowed. Harry waited behind the desk, unsettled by the whole matter. It occurred to him in a moment of bizarre consideration that he might let Bazzaz stay with him, but the notion promptly seemed ludicrous, partly because it sustained a reality that he would still possibly prefer to be a dream. Abruptly, he was called off to the hotel storeroom on another matter, and when he returned, the manager was leaning on the desk with a hard, self-satisfied expression.

"Another deadbeat bites the dust," he said.

"He's gone?" Harry asked.

"Did you see that *suitcase*!?" the manager scoffed.

At home that night, Harry put the ticket in the top drawer of his dresser, where he suspected it would disappear overnight. But in the morning, it was still there. He tried to shut it out of his mind, and didn't look again when he came home from work at the end of the day. The next morning, it was still there.

The following day, Harry called American Airlines to ask if there was a record of his reservation to San Juan. There was. During the next few days, several times, Harry came to the brink of making the decision to take a

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vacation and use the ticket, but he always hesitated. A couple of weeks passed, and Chicago's tough winter made its debut. Often each day, Harry's mind would wander to thoughts of the Caribbean, of the azure waters and deep blue skies, stunning white beaches and languorous palm trees, of Martinique, Aruba, St. Croix, and Tobago — and he saw himself in the Sea Cliffs hotel in the harbor of St. Thomas, and at the Cinnamon Reef Beach Club on Anguilla behind a succession of yellow and pink fruit-flavored rum drinks.

Then one night, Harry came home to find his apartment ransacked by thieves. His TV and VCR and stereo were gone, some of his clothes, the collection of expensive coffee-table books of photographs of foreign places, and the ticket was missing from the dresser drawer.

It seemed to Harry that it snowed continually that winter. In the streets and against the buildings, snow fell silently like the soft settling of flakes in a stirred crystal paperweight. The days were dark, and the cold was always waiting when one left the comfort of warm rooms. But it was enlivening, too, in a way, and Harry usually took the opportunity provided by his lunch hour to leave the hotel and walk the streets to some restaurant blocks away. It was on one of these trips on a clear but livid day that, in passing a large frosted window, he glanced inside, and something vaguely familiar caught his eye. Stepping back, he looked into a room whose walls were decorated with posters showing ocean liners and beaches and mountains. He stared at a man sitting at one of the three desks, eating his lunch from a brown paper bag. It was M. Bazzaz. Harry read the gold lettering on the window: ADVENTURER TRAVEL SERVICE. He stood there for a moment, musing, then opened the door and went inside. Bazzaz looked up at him as he sat in the chair beside his desk.

"Hello," Harry said.

Bazzaz put down the piece of German chocolate cake he was about to take a bite from. "Well," he said, and smiled. "Hello."

"You found a job," Harry said, pleased.

"Yes. I *was* good for something. A fount of stories about places. To entice travelers. . . ."

"Well, I'm glad it worked out. I couldn't do anything to stop—"

"No, no, please," Bazzaz said, smiling and holding up a hand. "It is all good now. And you? Took the trip?"

Harry told him what had happened, and Bazzaz made a glum sound and

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smacked his forehead with a palm. "Incredible!" Then, after a few seconds, he said, "Say, I'll bet you could use a vacation now. Eh? San Juan, was it?" He tapped a finger repeatedly on the desk. "Get away from this *cold*! Bora Bora? Rio de Janeiro? Have Christmas on Christmas Island!"

Harry said, "Well, I can't go now. But it sounds great."

"Ah." Bazzaz held up a finger. "Do yourself a favor. As we talk, just now, frogs prowl the ferns in the Amazon Basin, and a butterfly the color of a lovely lady's eye shadow lolls on a grand-grand kapok tree. You would love it! Why not watch the Christmas movies in a villa with open-air living room on Jamaica, play golf among sugarcane and coconut trees? As we talk, in Costa Rica, girls in pink swimsuits walk out of houses like white cakes to stand ankle-deep in sand as warm as oven heat."

Listening to Bazzaz, Harry was borne away on a flying carpet of the imagination, even as he glanced through the frost-rimed window at the cold Chicago day.

Bazzaz went on in this vein, laying on lots of tropical imagery. After a while, as if coming out of a coma, Harry roused himself. He had to get back to the hotel, he said, but would Bazzaz consent to having lunch with him? Tomorrow?

The next day, throughout lunch, which for Bazzaz was mostly dessert (three kinds), Harry listened, spellbound, to more of the same kind of talk from his new friend. Bazzaz pursued Harry like a determined salesman. The lunch became a regular thing, at least once a week, and as the hounds of spring bore down on winter's traces, Bazzaz tapered off on the tropical imagery. As spring warmed, he was telling Harry about the white-misted blue towers of the Dolomites in Italy; the windows full of gold watches, crystal, and silk blouses and gleaming bank windows along Zurich's Bahnhofstrasse; the dazzling reflected glow in the nighttime waters of the Seine of the lamps along the Pont Neuf. Harry felt that he was always on the verge of choosing a vacation, but in the face of so many fascinating tableaux; he never quite made up his mind. Someday, he told himself, he would take a trip, and then he would, of course, use the services of M. Bazzaz. Someday. And one day, he was sure, he definitely would.

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Tony Daniel is a graduate of Clarion West. He is originally from the south, but he has resettled in Seattle. His fiction is just beginning to appear, with his most recent publication in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. *"Locusts" explores, vrey delicately, the ways that relationships thrive — and fail.*

Locust

By Tony Daniel

I LIKE INSECTS MORE than most do. People call me an entomologist. "Dr. Bug" is what the children yell as they pass my window after school each day. "Here come the locusts," I yell right back, and have the house send out a swarm to tickle their noses and creepy-crawl down their backs. Harmless. I engineered these locusts myself. They have no mandibles, and sip nectar for breakfast. Not very useful, but I have fun with them. The children mock-scream and go skittering down the street. They come back after supper to see my firefly shows.

Kaitlin loved fireflies. We have natural ones in abundance in this climate. I would walk through clouds of them on the way to her house the summer I was courting her. They'd swirl in the air currents my passing body set up like cool embers of the setting sun's fire. After dark we'd sit on the porch and watch their semaphore of romance, the males doing their best to shine for the lady bugs. Kaitlin thought they looked like a real city might have. Some grow up loving horses, or spaceships, or, in my case, insects.

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Kaitlin loved cities — the old ones, the true ones — with a deep, abiding devotion.

As for me, I don't suppose the beauty of the firefly twinkle reminded me of anything in those days. I lived in the present moment. The musk of summer and Kaitlin surrounded me, and I merely existed, breathing in the sweetness. Fireflies were just part of the shimmering background against which I observed my still brighter love, Kaitlin. Toward the end of that summer, my twenty-second year, we began to see one another every day.

Mostly, we explored the neighborhood, going on long walks through our village and into the rolling hills of forests and fields surrounding it. The world was exciting, yet peaceful. I'd passed my boards at the time, and was working on my dissertation. No hurry. I was a year ahead of schedule. Insects come to me with very little effort. I'd shown off my new-minted knowledge to Kaitlin, filling jars with additions to my collection already bulging from a childhood of gathering, zoological Latin dripping off my tongue like *Apis mellifera* honey. The common honeybee is about the only species I can remember the Latin for nowadays without consulting the ROM chip neatly tucked into my cerebellum. But there are trade-offs. At twenty-two, I could barely induce the amino acid diarrhea in *E. coli*, much less perform the intricate task of engineering my own locust from scratch. I did, however, have ardor going for me. And so did Kaitlin.

She spent her days in cityspace, rubbing elbows with the world. I never knew exactly what she did for a living, though it was not for lack of asking. May as well ask a worker bee what it does for a living. What the hive requires, I suppose it would respond. Not grudgingly. Not with weariness. With a kind of amusement, as if you'd asked precisely the wrong question.

"A little of this and that," Kaitlin would answer, with that bee-amused expression. "I'm sort of a middleman, an information mediator."

As autumn came in with a wash of color, she spent her nights with me. I'll never really understand what she saw in me. I am no prime specimen of *Homo sapiens*. I look more like one of my specimens: kind of buggy, a tangle of limbs and moppy hair.

"But you can *think* like me," said Kaitlin when I asked her. "Even if you don't like to."

"I can think like me, Sol Carruthers. And at the moment, I spend most of my daylight hours thinking like a common grasshopper."

My dissertation dealt with the genetic triggers for the formation of parts

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seven to fifteen of the eighteen pieces to the grasshopper jaw.

"I'm like a grasshopper, Sol." She took my hand then, I remember, opened my palm, and worked her fingers down the creases. She had warm, mammalian hands.

"Grasshoppers are computer programs wrapped up in chitin. They have very simple instructions: eat and mate."

"There's something else," she said, "something deeper. There's something inside them telling them to rub elbows, to keep each other company. Not just for survival. For something even more important."

"Uh-huh."

Then she was very silent. But she moved my hand to find *her* folds and creases.

I hadn't told her what really happens when some species of grasshoppers become overcrowded.

They metamorphose. They develop brilliant colors, electric pinks and yellows, distended wings and mandibles. They dance about in a frenzy of clacking. Then, when enough of them have changed, they swarm into the air. That is what we call a locust plague. Locusts are grasshoppers that rubbed elbows once too often. I flew to Nebraska a few years ago and saw them covering a field of wheat. The clacking of the millions of jaw parts sounded like the roar of prairie fire.

In winter, after the proper formalities with her family and mine, Kaitlin and I became engaged and moved in together. We spent most of our days apart: she motionless on the couch, working in her simulated world; me at my experiments and studies. I ventured into cityspace only if I wanted to talk with a colleague, and even then I'd usually just make aural connection. I loved my life in the village, and I loved Kaitlin. And I believed that Kaitlin loved me. I know she did. There was something strong between us, something defined by our desires and needs. It was absolutely present, but I couldn't for the life of me point to it and say, "There, that's love. There."

You can collect buterflies with a large net.

You can collect them on the front grille of a Hovercraft.

You can stickpin them to a label.

But you can never, ever collect the behavior of a butterfly, its individual and necessary path through a given space. It is a gift from the universe, free — but it comes and goes; it scatters and gathers. And you are a lucky man when butterfly flight has somehow got into the interstices of your imagina-

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tion and infected everything you do, everything you are, like a good virus, like an unexpected cure for the human condition.

Love is maybe like that. Except, in autumn, all the butterflies die.

"Why don't we go to a nightclub?" Kaitlin said to me one day at lunch. Most days she took a simulated lunch in the City, skipping a real one at home. Meals, real or imagined, are still an essential medium for human communication. As Kaitlin put it, she could get more business done over a roast beef sandwich than she could over a conference table or under satin sheets. I preferred eating lunch alone to her having to miss lunch and employ those other methods. But today we were eating real ham-and-cheese sandwiches made from ingredients I'd bought from a farmer down the road.

"We can jet over to Jacksonville, see the Shakespeare festival," I suggested.

"No. A band. Smoke. Drinks. Cityspace." She worked her eyebrows up and down.

"Well, sure —"

"Maybe find an algorithm that's not quite legal. Direct limbic shunt, tactile translation."

"A feel joint?"

She touched my hand across the table. "Yeah." Her feet moved up my leg.

"You know how to get there?"

"Sure do."

"You got it."

It had been awhile since I jacked into cityspace. Basically, you mentally pop up your peripherals, choose full-net participation, and off you go. Down a long, bright tunnel, undulating like a snake on speed. Up ahead, there is a prism of colors. It gets bigger, more complex. You squeeze out of the tunnel like a watermelon seed shot from wet fingers. You are flying. We were flying, Kaitlin and I, holding hands. Below us was the nighttime City.

It is a composite of old helicopter footage and the net's fractal extrapolation. Kind of unreal and real at the same time. Spooky. Kaitlin led me by the hand like she'd been born to the cityspace air. The lights twinkled like stars and fireflies. Then she triangulated on a cluster of lights. It became a building as we got closer, defined in 3-D by neon lines. We swooped downward, Kaitlin exploiting performance in the accessing software I didn't know existed. Down, fast, into an alley, full of data refuse. Old numbers, bent and crunched, like dead ants after an anthill war. Straight for the solid

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wall at the alley's end. "Kaitlin. . . ." Then through it, a green curtain into pinks and blues, the curl of smoke toward a low ceiling. Big mother standing by a turnstile, doing alpha scans as we filed in.

And people. Everywhere. You couldn't move without bumping into them, without jostling drinks or barely missing the burn of carelessly fingered cigarettes. Loud music and the still more deafening buzz and hum of human conversation hitting you viscerally. Human company and pressure. You felt it to the bone. It set your bones buzzing in sympathetic vibration.

"Isn't this great?" shouted Kaitlin in my ear. I could barely make out her words. I nodded weakly.

And got through the night. Kaitlin had a wonderful time. We danced and drank and danced some more. Or rather, we moved about a little within the microscopic space between our bodies and the peoples' next to us. It wasn't City alcohol they were serving, either, some feedback loop designed to give you a mild current in the cerebrum. This booze algorithm was brutal; it dug down deep, found your emotional centers, the places where you kept the best feelings, and pulled them to the surface. It was all fluff, of course. There was no intellect attached to the feelings. But I had Kaitlin in my arms, and that was all I needed.

"I wish it could always be this way," she whisper-yelled in my ear. "I wish we didn't ever have to go back."

Why did Kaitlin love this place, this feeling so? Was it all that time in cityspace, reveling in the crowdedness, the companionship there, but missing the touch of living skin against living skin? Did she long for both at the same time? Or was it something deeper, something genetic? Was Kaitlin predisposed to seek the congregation, the amalgamation, of her own kind as some are driven to isolation by the codework in their cells? Or, I hesitate to say, was it something spiritual, beyond rationality?

She'd never seen a real city. There haven't been any real cities for hundreds of years. Only the City. A thing of the mind. A big meeting place, a big town hall done up in pretty lights and shifting colors. I wish to God there were real cities, with all the stink, all the crime, all the waste. I wish to God the world were a little less perfect. Because there is not a fucking Utopia anywhere big enough, deep enough, good enough for us all. And this world, my world, couldn't contain Kaitlin.

It didn't happen all at once. At first, days in the City and nights — more

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and more — going to the feel joints were enough. But feel joints will burn you out like a moth in a candle. We both knew it, and knew we had to stop. You can't simulate another universe down to the last feel-it-in-the-bones detail without a separate universe to put your computer in. Feel joints took shortcuts that weren't kind to the human wiring.

I began to fall behind in my dissertation. I spent whole days puttering about with my bugs, recovering from our wild nights, getting no work done. Kaitlin noticed, and we took to going to cityspace only on Friday nights. She tried to get more involved in village life. Most of us use cityspace as a medium of barter and a place to visit friends and relatives. Life is pretty much centered in the village, which is almost completely self-contained where all the basics are concerned. Think of planet Earth as a dew-sprinkled spiderweb, with the villages being the water droplets interconnected by the web of the net. Think of indignation over injustice, poverty, and natural destruction as the spider that spun the web, then crawled away to die, thankfully. That's the world for you, like it or not. Kaitlin tried hard to like it. Maybe too hard.

My money was running out, and I had to apply for a teaching fellowship. It wasn't hard to get, but it took even more time away from my study of grasshopper intricacies. I spent mornings in cityspace, at the University, teaching my intro class in genetics. So I made up for it by extending my research into the evening. I had hit upon the odd idea of rebuilding the grasshopper from the nucleotides up. Brute-force method of solving a problem in genetic decoding. I kept pulling almost-alive monstrosities from my protein broth. I kept at it, and one day I awoke to a house full of grasshoppers.

They were everywhere. On the bedspread. Clinging to the walls, the ceiling. They crackled beneath my feet as I trod gingerly to my workroom. There, bubbling like a mad doctor's brew of strange chemicals, my synthesizer was churning out grasshoppers. My new code was working. I'd forgotten to shut the damn thing off the night before. *Voila!* Instant grasshoppers, alive and hungry. I turned off the synthesizer, then opened the doors and windows and shooed them out.

"Kaitlin," I called. "Come and see. Come and see my grasshoppers."

I was so flustered and busy that it was not until I sat down at the kitchen table and called up a cup of coffee that I saw the note. It was written on good cotton paper, made by a woman in the village. Kaitlin's writing was elegant

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and discreet, like tiny ladybird beetles on the page. Succinct.

Dear Sol,
Have gone to space. Don't the stars look like a city to you sometimes? They do to me. Maybe I'll find one out there. A real one. You love this beautiful green world too much for me to ask you to come with me. I love you.

Kaitlin

I knew it was too late, but I checked anyway. Shuttle had left Jacksonville for the Skywheel an hour earlier. The *Archegonium*, a generation colony ship, was leaving at noon Greenwich. Kaitlin must have flown out in the middle of the night to get up there on time. Breakneck speed. No turning back. An hour between us now. Soon a hundred years, a thousand. That hard-hearted constant, relativity, separating us like a black curtain of evil, the gloomy shape in the mirror in a dark room, shifting while we shift, never giving us a glimpse around its edges. Never letting us look into each other's eyes. Never, ever, again.

I guess she just couldn't stand all the space in the world. Those colony ships are packed crowded and tight. But sometimes I think it was the grasshoppers, emerging during the night.

Sometimes I think all that closeness of living bodies, the movement and commotion of close contact, living body to living body, filled her dreams. I think she metamorphosed into something beautiful and strange. But still Kaitlin. Still Kaitlin in there somewhere.

I've quite lost track of the time. The children are returning, and it's time to let the fireflies loose. I've recently turned from grasshoppers to fireflies in my studies. Somewhere, in all that twinkling, I think there is a pattern, a communication. No, don't think me daft and mystical. But they do sort of look like cities, when they all get going. At least I think so, having never truly seen a city. Maybe there is a kind of synergism in great numbers. Maybe something emerges when life rubs against life in the physical, in the body. I love her still. I'll never see her again. But I would like to understand. Here come the children now, jostling each other to get the best view of the show.

I hope, by God, that there are cities up there. I hope the stars are teeming with them.

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

The War in 2020, Ralph Peters, Pocket, $19.95

I Shudder at Your Touch, Michele Slung, Ed., Roc, $18.95

No Blood Spilled, Les Daniels, Tor, $3.95

RALPH PETERS is, of course, the author of *Red Army*, surely one of the best books of predictive technomilitary thinking ever written — for all that its events now seem unlikely ever to occur. He is also the author of *Bravo Romeo*, a far less successful — and earlier — book of which the best that can be said for it is that it is unexceptionable . . . and that it does contain the seeds of *Red Army*, somewhere in it, no doubt.

Now Peters has written *The War in 2020*, a frankly science fictional account of a military campaign, like *Red Army*, but unlike *Red Army*, fleshed out with subplots and extended characterizations, so that it is exactly like a science fiction novel.* How is it?

I think it doesn't have the single-minded drive of *Red Army*, and it — very occasionally — shows the author moving the plot around to suit his convenience, rather than verisimilitude, but we have found, at least, an author who can consistently deliver the goods. Whether he can deliver them in any line but the technomilitary is another matter, but one that we need not take up now; *The War in 2020* is a most satisfactory read. It is also a most satisfactory think-piece, if you like knotty puzzles, but we will get to that.

It says, first of all, that in the near future the U.S. military will be so enervated (and dangerously obsolete as far as its equipment goes) that a Japanese/South African effort will wipe us out of Africa with the

** It isn't* called *a science fiction novel, of course; that would put it in competition with the works of, for just one instance, David Drake. And that would never do, for David Drake, like the rest of us, is a mere — but you have heard all this before, haven't you?*

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ease of a man swatting a fly.

That's for openers. With it is Runciman's Disease, a deadly plague that kills most of those exposed to it, leaves most of the living mentally handicapped, and scars the fortunate few who survive with no other aftereffects; that plague starts out in Africa, but soon spreads throughout the world.

Then, as 2020 nears, Peters adds the Muslim alliance of several nationalities, falling on the Soviet Union from without and, with the help of rebellious Soviet Muslim units of the army, within. The European Soviets cannot stand against this — the empire crumbles, loyal units of the army in hopeless retreat, fighing doomed rear-guard actions.

Behind all this are the Japanese, supplying arms and "advisors" not to all comers, not fighting themselves, but having for clients first the South Africans and later the Muslims. Europe generally is in retreat, the western countries such as France and Germany huddling in on themselves; when Russia is crushed, there will be a new map of the world, and the only sure thing is that the Japanese will be the preeminent seller to this market. America — which was the first to fall to this tactic of fighting through dummies in order to increase the Japanese market share — is already out of it.

Or so it would seem. But, quietly, America has one more chance; a division of M-100s, a fighting vehicle even more potent than the Japanese Toshiba gunships, so new that they have never been combat tested, the perhaps last leading edge of a barely resurgent American technology, which, in a move that has been carefully concealed from the Muslims and the Japanese, and their South African hirelings, now lie concealed in a devastated factory complex deep inside the Soviet Union.

They are there in the first place as part of an unlikely and hidden alliance, forged in desperation and mistrust, between the U.S. and the European Soviets. In a few days, they will go into action against the Muslims — and, more important, the Japanese behind them — while, all unbeknownst to various parties, there are any number of additional factors which will come into play before the whole thing is done. For two, the treachery of the Russians, and the unexpected resourcefulness of the Japanese.

But we can leave the recital of the plot details here. They are, in the reading, often very good, and never less than good; there are moments when you will, I think, come close to weeping for the various human beings caught in

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these gears, of whom I have told you nothing, in order that you might enjoy them more. And you will, occasionally, laugh out loud, too; it's really a very good book. But I would like to take a moment or two to speak to a more fundamental level of this book; the fact that it's deadly serious about its geopolitics.

Peters, with the publication of *Red Army*, was identified as a functionary of the U.S. Army, with expertise in Soviet matters. With *The War in 2020*, he is more specifically identified as an Army intelligence officer, long stationed overseas, who speaks fluent German and a number of Russian dialects,* has travelled extensively in both eastern Europe and the far-flung corners of the Soviet Union, and has been published widely on military affairs, including translation into many languages.

We are, in short, not just reading about a future war, we are being made privy to an expert's thinking about many things. And among things Peters says, in an afterword to the book, is that while he does not expect this particular scenario to play itself out in real life, it could. And he does think the Japanese, and the Russians, and the Americans, and the Muslims, will act the way they do given the chance, because he sincerely believes he has captured these various national characteristics definitively.

This could be; despite wide divergences from type in the case of individuals, there does seem to be such a thing as a national character, particularly if you put stress enough on a nation — which, God knows, is true in this case. I am an expert, too, but not as broad-based a one as Peters, and I cannot say to him "No, you're wrong." For two reasons. One, I agree with him 100% in most cases. Two, where I don't, this may very well reflect a shortage of data on my part.

His Russians strike me as spot on. *Glastnost* and *perestroika* seem to me bankrupt doctrines, promulgated by Gorbachev not as seriously intended from the heart but rather in an increasingly wan attempt to pre-empt the Russian liberals who *do* believe them — and in any case the whole thing is doomed to failure. We will either get a military repression, which will reimpose totalitarian structures for a time, or the military will prove to have already been weakened to the point where they cannot succeed, at which point we will get breakaway republics — including my Lithuania — and nearly total anarchy through-

** I gather what is meant by this is Slavic dialects. I am quoting from the publisher's PR release. One thing the release does not say is that "Ralph Peters" is almost surely not the author's real name.*

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out what remains of the European Soviet Union. Absolutely total chaos will reign throughout Asia, including the breaking away of the Asian Soviet republics, followed by scenes of internecine bloodshed the like of which cannot be fully imagined by anyone living today. We will be very lucky if we do not see nuclear war, and almost as lucky if it does not spill over onto the U.S.*

His Japanese I have to agree with, but on a less fundamental level. The Japanese have seemed to me to be sober, industrious folk with a singlemindedness of purpose which is both their triumph and their tragedy; they do not know when to draw back, and the result is they always go too far in the end. But this is an observation at a distance; I have not travelled in Japan, or had much contact with them in any way, unlike my father, who for a time was stationed by the Imperial Russian government in Vladivostok, in order to keep an eye on the industrious Japanese. (He later was stationed in Germany, by the Lithuanian government, to keep an eye on the Nazis. So it goes.)

I recite all this in order to make an SF point, and I will be making it, I promise you. Not just yet, though.

Peters's South Africans are sketched in; they barely exist in his pages, and can be neglected. His Muslims, however, are a different matter. They are not especially drawn in depth either, but he does not even attempt to conceal his deepseated contempt for them, or the genuine feeling on his part that he knows them; that they are a people mired in poverty, pride, and illusion. In other words, that Peters's contempt is genuine.

Well, obviously I cannot say him nay, particularly with the war against Saddam Hussein so recently fought, and in such a basically ludicrous way as to seriously suggest that Peters is dead right. And it is interesting that Peters wrote his book of course before that war, thus seeming to confirm his uncanny ability to predict.

But is it in fact that simple? Peters regards the Muslims with contempt, he feels the Russians are totally muddled, he likes the Japanese up to a point but finds them going beyond it in the end; he does not say in this book, but in *Red Army* he had the Germans quitting — when the Americans were actually beginning to win the war — can it be, I say to myself, that by God's good mercy I am in with the only truly worthwhile people on Earth?

* *It's my honest opinion. And, unfortunately, I have a very good track record. More to the immediate point, what this does is confirm Peters in my opinion.*

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Really? It's quite an unlikely combination of events that led my father here in 1936, instead of Paris, for instance. Would I read this book the same way if I had to read it in French? Would I smile ruefully and say, well, *zut alors,* the Americans do, after all, possess a certain *sang froid* which makes them, *naturellement,* the only genuine kings of the Earth?

You see, this is the science fiction point. We — we SF people —have congregated together, in all our infinite variety in most other respects, around the proposition that it's *not* that simple. We like to believe, we really do, that there is a great deal more to it than simple black and white, that individuals are more important than the mass from which they sprang, and all that other weak bullshit which, somehow, year after year, generation after generation, endures when more monolithic doctrines triumph repeatedly . . . and fade away repeatedly. Every time — Naziism, Stalinism, McCarthyism — it seems as if the handle has been found at last, and the totalitarians will win; instead they lose. And I think the reason they look like they're going to win but then they lose is that people will put up with an amazing amount before they turn their attention away from food, clothing and shelter. But once they get the idea that something is actually going to mess with that unless they do something *now*, watch out. In actual fact, not a single despotism has been able to stand up in the end. (Not that the boys in the uniforms and boots haven't had a hell of a good time, short term.)

I think my ultimate point is that Peters is entertaining as all hell, and you should go ahead and enjoy the book, which you almost surely shall, and Peters is a hell of a writer; underneath that, however, you should understand that where he tries to make the book more than that, and present the case that it is some type of scenario for the real world — there, you have to look at it very, very carefully.

I Shudder at Your Touch is an anthology, of 22 stories, edited by Michele Slung, on the theme of sex and horror. Oddly enough, this theme also was the subject of a panel at the very recent first World Horror Convention, where such as Kathe Koja played with it, joked at it, found it almost a given in all horror fiction, and had a good time with it generally. Would that I could say the same for Michele Slung. I cannot.

There are some good pieces in here — "Death And the Single Girl," by Thomas M. Disch, "Jacqueline Ess: Her Will and Testament" by

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Clive Barker (despite its being almost shamelessly padded in the middle sections); most assuredly, "The Conqueror Worm," by Stephen R. Donaldson, and "The Master Builder," by Christopher Fowler. But the stories are freighted over with the editor's introductions, which seem to me, very often, to be pointless, or contradictory; worse, far from all the stories are first-rate.

The Stephen King, for instance — "The Revelations of 'Becka Paulson" — goes along just fine until the ending, which is so much less than what we have been built up for. The Robert Hichens — "How Love Came to Professor Guildea" — is not only bad once its premise has been established, it is long. And so forth. What we have, I strongly suspect from evidence gathered in the preface and the individual story precedes, is Slung's homage to her own youth; stories included not because they have stood the test of time but because they were read long ago, and re-read often since, so that the editor has failed to notice that many of them are in fact less than fully successful.

Pity. It was a nice idea.

At the World Horror Con, in Nashville, we were given books. Quite a few books, if you went to the Tor party, where in a matter of moments, literally, the free samples were consumed by the seemingly innumerable horde. Much the same could be said for the Abyss party, Abyss being the name Dell has given its horror imprint (and the first title of which series, *Cipher*, was by the aforementioned Kathe Koja). The principal difference was that Tor has pretty much given up on horror, for the time being, whereas Dell is just starting out. It will be interesting to see what the situation is a year from now. But in any case, I read a couple of books, at the con and in the airplane flying home, and settled on *No Blood Spilled*, by Les Daniels, to tell you about.

No Blood Spilled is, first of all, the second book in "The Chronicles of Don Sebastian," who is a vampire. Second, it is not first-rate. But it is, as Douglas Winter says in it somewhere, a delight.

As the story opens, Reginald Callender has been saved from death only by the newly instituted McNaughten Rule of English jurisprudence. He is too nuts to die, insisting, of all things, that his beloved's death was a tragic error; that he meant to pound the stake through the vampire's heart instead. Well, for some reason they don't believe him; lucky for him, he escapes, thanks to a well-intentioned relative, and sets off, physically a much better person than the fop he once was, to India.

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Why to India? Because Sebastian Newcastle — which is Don Sebastian's new name — is enroute there. Little does Callender know that in fact Newcastle is in bad shape, his boat having gone down with all hands, and he afloat on the Bay of Bengal in a coffin. Fortunately for Newcastle, he is rescued by Jamini, an orphaned child, who falls in love with the vampire because he treats the waif decently.

Well, sir, Newcastle soon comes upon the cult of Kali, and despite the fact that Thugs, the agents of Kali, only kill with the kerchief — thus the title of this book — pretty soon the blood flows quite freely. We have but to add the characters of Lieutenant Hawke, of the British East India Company; the recently widowed Sarala; and the silk merchant — and head Thug — Kalidas, and we are in business for sure. I particularly recommend the scene with the cannon in the rain.

In the end, Hawke and Kalidas are dead, the widow is quite transformed, the child goes one way and the vampire goes another, and Callender must . . . .

Well, the marvelous thing about this book is that it hardly matters where you come in or go out. For the length of time you are on board, hardly a moment goes by without *something* happening.

When you think about it, that's quite a lot. I don't imagine Daniels takes this any more seriously than we do, but he gives good value for money nevertheless.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

The Illusionists, Faren Miller (Warner/Questar, paper, 213pp)
Nicoji, Shayne Bell (Baen, paper, $3.95

HAVING READ with relish *Spy Magazine's* log-rolling pieces, in which they show authors giving each other flattering quotes for book jackets (X: "Y is our greatest living stylist"—Y: "X has such a sensitive soul"), I am quite uncomfortable giving a favorable review to a novel by someone who has already given favorable reviews to some of my own books. I *could* just point out that it's part of the vitality of our field that so many critics are also authors, and that it would be hard to write a review column that never reviewed a book by someone who also wrote reviews ... but that would be a cop-out. Because the fact is that, in the normal flow of books and galleys and manuscripts across our kitchen table, the reason *The Illusionists* caught my eye was *because* I remembered Miller's name as that of a reviewer who had been kind to my work.

Likewise, Shayne Bell is a dear friend, and I have great hopes for his career. I read early versions of *Nicoji*, his first novel, in manuscript, and again, I have many nonliterary reasons to be favorably disposed to the final published version. I picked up both of these books with a strongly favorable bias. I truly wanted them to succeed.

But then, I want *every* author to succeed. I want *every* book I start to read to be wonderful. Unfortunately, regardless of how well I know an author, or how favorably disposed I might be toward him or her, I am usually disappointed. Most books fail. And since it is my preference not to review books that I don't think are worth reading, I do for friends the same kindness I do for strangers: I do not mention the book in print.

What about when the book succeeds, though? What do I do when the author's style is delicious, when the story's moral universe is deep and fascinating, when the milieu is richly created, when the ending feels true and right? Am I fettered by my friendship or my appreciation? I hope

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not; I hope that it is enough to let you know my probable bias, and then to review these books as I would any others that pleased me as much.

The Illusionists is a fantasy, set in a vast medieval city that still revolves around a fascination with the ancient mages who once ruled there. Scavengers still scrabble through the ruins of the mages' old palaces in order to find relicts and artifacts; one such scavenger has found a globe that has a malevolent will of its own. By theft and murder it has finally come into the possession of the Vinculine, a man with Lyndon Johnson's lust for power and even fewer scruples than LBJ about how to get it.

The story is about a brilliant woman — a "percept" — and a vengeance-bent young man with a gift for mimicry and acting, as they pursue their separate courses through the city in an effort to keep the Vinculine from mastering the use of the artifact. Miller's style is lush without interfering with the story; the relationships among characters are quirky and well-conceived. The only problem with the book, I believe, is that Miller is not yet aware of how much *room* there is in a novel. This is a story that should have been told in four hundred, not two hundred pages. Especially toward the end, things happen far too quickly. There isn't time to digest the shifting relationships among the characters, and by the novel's finish the reader is left exhausted from having sprinted through the last seventy pages. There simply isn't time to get to know *as individuals* all the characters whose names and relationships Miller expects us to remember; more frustrating is the fact that, because Miller is such a wonderfully inventive storyteller, we would surely have relished every additional page had the novel only been thicker.

Never mind ... brevity aside, this strong debut not only promises many good works from Miller in the future but also is a good read in itself. One of the real delights in the book is the way Miller's magic makes use of the sense of smell, perhaps the least consciously understood of our senses. By the time I was through reading *The Illusionists,* I was vaguely disappointed that in the real world my olfacture is as blunt as a bludgeon; I wanted to be able to experience odor with the precision and discrimination of the characters in this book.

Shayne Bell's *Nicoji* is a much darker book, a novel about oppressed and exploited peoples struggling to win their freedom. Like some of the great liberation novels of the past — I think of *Vandenburg* and *White*

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Lotus — *Nicoji* does not pretend that rebellion is easy or that success can be quick. This means that it isn't as much fun to read as *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*, a novel that I loved but never, not for a moment, *believed* — but at the end you know that in these characters you have met, not cleverness, but nobility.

The novel takes place on a world that is being mercilessly exploited for the highly edible and hard-to-harvest nicoji, a lobsteresque alien creature that civilized people can't seem to get enough of. The human beings on this world are either bosses or grunt labor; naturally, it is with the grunt labor, their souls owed to the company store, that we spend our time. To complicate the picture, the humans routinely make use of trainable animals called the Help, who (of course) turn out to be sentient.

This situation could easily have degenerated into cliché, but there was no draft of this book in which Bell was anything but inventive and truthful. People that we come to like a lot can die in this book; people who do their best can fail. And yet in the end the message is clear: It is *not* vain to have struggled, and even those who die with their story known only to the handful of people — or aliens — who loved them have nonetheless justified their lives. As Bell's heroes escape from "civilization" and wander out into an increasingly hostile native terrain, their focus becomes more and more narrow — survival for another day, another hour — and yet their vision also broadens, until they see what no one in the corporation has ever seen — the larger rhythms of the planet that make life there a constant challenge for any kind of life to survive at all.

Nicoji is good science fiction, in that the science is carefully invented and utterly plausible. It is good sci-fi, in that the story is gripping, the characters easy to believe in and care about even at their bleakest moments — though the story *can* get awfully bleak! It is well and clearly written, with an author who never interrupts the tale to show you the cool stuff he can do with words. And even if Shayne Bell were not one of the most wise and decent human beings it's been my pleasure to know on this planet, I'd recommend this book to you without reservation.

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Robert Reed's "Pipes" explores an age-old idea, the effect that human beings have on their environment. The science fictional element and the passion of the characters, particularly Johnny Whiteeagle, make this story new and strong. Bob's most recent novel, Black Milk, *has just appeared in paperback from Bantam.*

Pipes

By Robert Reed

I WAS LIVING SOUTH of campus, upstairs in one of those big old houses cut up into apartments of impractical sizes and shapes. The neighborhood itself was halfway gone — empty lots and shaggy grass, deer in the night and the old people with their pensions and their inertia. The university was planning to move next year. To Omaha. At least there was industry in Omaha, and a stable population, and I was promised a permanent position if I could make my work sing. *Sing.* That's how the project head said it. "Make it sing, Aaron," he told me. "You're the final filter. My editor. The one who puts the pieces into a harmonious whole." He was a charming and gracious asshole, and he rode me about deadlines and the needs of the government. Which is why I worked at home, avoiding his pointed smiles and pestering questions. In order to get the miracles done.

I was putting in eighteen- and twenty-hour days. Sometimes all-hour days. The work involved some of the largest, fastest computing power in the Midwest, yet still it needed me to baby-sit. To sit and watch the

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essentials on the linkup screen, keeping alert with synthetic coffee and an assortment of pills. Doing all sorts of hell to my moods.

This is about moods.

One night, late, I wandered out into the kitchen and started cooking. Everything was ancient, half the appliances broken and the rest sputtering along. I started cleaning pots and killing the roaches as I found them. I let the tap water run, and the drain drained for a little while, then it quit. So I rooted under the sink and found a bottle of drain cleaner. The liquid was minty and blue, and the label said, "Poison," aloud. "Poison, poison." I poured in twice the suggested dosage and felt the curling pipe turn too hot to touch. Yet nothing was draining. Not even after I finished dinner. Well, I thought, what a bitch. I went downstairs and wrestled my bike out the door and rode to the nearest store. One of those little automated shops that were big twenty years ago. I could smell fresh smoke in the wind. Somewhere west of town, the prairie was burning itself black, and twice I saw deer in the street, their eyes bobbing in my headlight. At the store I bought a can of pressurized, perfumed air — blasting the pipe clear fit my mood. Then I rode home and bailed out the sink, dumping the dirty water down my toilet, and I emptied the can into the drain. *Bang, bang, bang.* Nothing happened. The pipes rattled, sure, and the house seemed to shake. But that was all. The blockage was out of my reach, and I didn't have any choice but to call a random plumber — Whiteeagle Plumbing —and leave a message on his service.

Then I worked all night.

My high browsers were giving me trouble. And my sabertooths. The individual models built by the respective gene teams were full of hopeful projections and guesswork. Five and six generations into the simulation, and there were inadequate populations of camels and many too many sabertooths. Plus, the savanna itself — a strikingly African landscape of scattered trees and low grasses — was beginning to change. Ashes and oaks took the wrong shapes without being browsed. They were top-heavy, storms knocking them flat too often, and the wrong sorts of grasses were taking root and spreading. Ten generations later, and the sabertooths were causing a massive megafauna die-off. Camels were extinct — phantom bones on the imaginary ground — and the mammoths and horses and ground sloths were heading in much the same direction.

How could it be? I wondered.

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What the hell is going on!

It took me the night just to rework the camels. Not their actual genetics, no. Those were for the gene team. I concentrated on the basics. Birth weights. Parental care. Half a hundred little factors, and of course I didn't know if it would work. Or if I was disrupting still other factors and facets. All I could do was guess, then wait for the next run to see how my luck was running.

It was nearly nine o'clock when I finally punched up the sabertooth data. Nothing seemed obvious, at least at first glance. Something subtle? Something behavioral, maybe? I had the computers select a hundred successful hunts at random, and the linkup screen played each one at triple speed. What was that? I saw the big, muscular cats slipping through the grass and underbrush, stalking any and every piece of game in the area. Nothing was safe on the savanna. Even the adult mammoths, cagey and vast, were being killed. Two cats, working together, managed to panic the mammoths and drive them over a river bluff . . . and it didn't take me any neural readouts to see the cats loved it. The butchering on a vast scale . . . it was a game to them. A diversion. What the hell was this? I wondered. What was going on?

I got into the brain dimensions of the cats — reasonable — then into the neurological densities — very unreasonable! — and I beat on the table with a fist, screaming to myself. What were these fucking cat-people doing? Goddamn them and goddamn their mothers! Human beings didn't have those densities. Would you look? How could I work with genius cats? All that spare brainpower, and, out of sheer boredom, the things were killing off the megafauna. For the fun of it. Hunting instincts coupled with a staggering cleverness led to sociopathic sabertooths. . . Would you just look at this mess . . . !"

There came a knocking sound.

I didn't notice it at first. I was draining my coffee mug while hunting for the little red pills that gave me wings and clear thinking. Then again someone was knocking. It sounded as if they were using a tire iron on my apartment door. Who was it?

I stumbled into the living room, a little numb and stupid. For a minute I just stared at the door while it jumped in its frame, and I squinted, thinking it was the project head coming for a status report. Coming to remind me that our proposal had to be in at such-and-such time. The bastard.

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I managed to clear my throat and find my voice, saying, "Yeah?"

Someone shouted something about pipes. Was I the guy with pipe troubles?

I seemed to recall details from another life. Not my own. I opened the door and saw a short, massive man standing in the narrow hallway. He was dark like something left in the sun, and he was smiling. He had a round face pitted by some childhood infection, and his hair was long and black and rather oily. I could smell his breath. It was early in the morning, and his breakfast had been beer. A full-blooded member of some tribe or another, and I hadn't seen his like since my fieldwork in the Badlands.

His name was sewn on the pocket of his work shirt.

Johnny Whiteeagle.

"Hey, you don't look so good," he told me. Smiling. He had a big, effortless smile. "You're not feeling good, mister?"

"I've been better," I allowed.

"Maybe it's your plumbing. Ever think about that?" He let out a big laugh, shaking his head as if he were wickedly clever. "Anyway, you going to let me inside? Or what?"

"What for?"

"Your pipes, mister. Remember?"

I backed away. Pipes? Oh sure . . . that's right. "All right," I told him. "Come on."

He rattled when he walked. He wore an old leather belt heavy with tools and a portable battery, and the red-rimmed eyes took in the room with a glance. "In the kitchen?" He went straight to the sink and touched the drain with one hand, then the other, always gentle and professional. He was the picture of poise and ceremony, and it was kind of funny to watch. I saw him kneel and look at the curling pipe below, touching it in the same way while saying, "Would you look. They're metal. Antiques, practically." And he gave a satisfied nod. "You know something, mister? This is one fine old house you've got here."

I could smell facsimile peas rotting in the pipes, and grease from last night's cultured hamburger. Yeah, I thought, it's a splendid dear old place. But when are you getting to work?

He asked what had happened. Had I tried fixing it myself?

I kept the epic brief. I tried to seem pressed for time.

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"This is old plumbing, mister. If you want it to last," he warned, "you've got to baby it."

"All it is is plugged."

"Oh sure." He stood. He was massive and slow and fat, and when he moved, he breathed hard and wheezed. "Where's the bathroom?" he asked. "Around back here?"

He wanted to pee away his beer, I guessed. I looked at my watch and said, "That's right—"

"See, because the plug is way below us. I bet so. Has your bathtub been draining slow?"

"I've got a shower—"

"Has it?"

I couldn't remember.

"I bet so." He started toward the bathroom, rattling and wheezing. I considered going back to work and leaving him with his work, only I didn't. I couldn't. I didn't know him, and he was drunk, at least a little bit, and I had funny feelings because he was . . . well, who he was. A Native and all. Not that I'm a racist, of course. But I learned in the Badlands that these people have odd ideas about property, their culture so damned communal. And besides, I'd have to concentrate like a maniac just to keep him out of my thoughts. I wouldn't get shit done until he was gone. So I was his shadow. I watched him stand in the middle of the bathroom, turning and turning. He asked me, "What? Was this a bedroom once?" He said, "It looks like a bedroom. Am I right?"

"I don't know."

"Look at how big it is!"

I nodded and said nothing.

"Hell," he said, "it's a hike from the shower to the john. Isn't it?" He laughed and got his bearings and walked into the back corner. There was a simple closet built against the kitchen's wall. I kept old boxes and what-not inside it. He pulled open its curtain and asked, "Can I move the stuff—?"

I started to say, "Sure."

Boxes were tumbling to the floor. Then he bent and started tapping his stubby fingernails on the enormous black pipe that I'd probably seen a thousand times. It was a vertical pipe and smooth, and he laid both hands on the angling joint with a screwed-in cap. "It's as good as done," he

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promised. "This is the place. It won't take any time at all—"

Everything takes time. I wanted to tell him that universal truth.

"Here." He produced an enormous monkey wrench and fastened it to the cap, its motor humming, and him helping the motor by jerking the wrench with all of his weight. Sweat broke out on his bare arms and forehead, and he gave a funny look while saying, "Help me," through his teeth. Talking to the Great Spirit, I suppose. Years of rust resisted the pressures. Then there was a *pop* and a creaking sound, threads moving against threads. "Yeah!" he squealed. And when the cap was undone, he placed it upside down on one of the boxes, then leaned against the kitchen's wall to pant.

I watched him.

"Yeah," he said, "I've worked everywhere in this town. For years. I used to work on the governor's pipes and inside the government buildings." He pulled a mechanical spider from a sealed pouch. It was old but still shiny, a cord sprouting from its back, and him plugging the cord's free end into the battery riding on his hip. "Inside houses here and everywhere. I know this town from its pipes. Let me tell you—"

"Yeah?"

"Mansions and trailers and everything between."

I waited.

He asked, "What about you? What do you do?"

"School."

"You in it or teach it?"

"No, work for the university," I explaned. "See, I'm real busy with this project—"

"It's leaving soon, isn't it? The professors and everything?"

"That's better than staying," I replied. How long had it been since I'd talked to another person? I couldn't remember. Days, at least, and I couldn't help but say, "Once the farms collapsed, everything started to slide. To die. Nobody wants to live here anymore."

"Don't I know it," he told me. "Just like you say, mister. It's all sliding. I've seen it happening since way back when."

Then I said, "Not that it's all bad. Of course."

He looked at me, his smile changing.

Did I say something wrong? I wondered.

"No." He told me, "You're right," and showed his yellow teeth. "I was

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He touched a hidden switch on the spider's back; the shiny long legs began to move.

thinking that just the other night. Telling my wife it was something watching all you folks heading out of here." He touched a hidden switch on the spider's back. The shiny long legs began to move, kicking and curling, and I nearly could smell the power in them. I nearly could feel their cutting tips slicing at the air. "There you go." He was talking to the spider. He put it down the opened pipe and turned to me again, saying, "Yeah, I think it's great to see. I mean, this country wasn't meant to be corn and more corn, and I don't miss it."

The farms began crumbling when the cheap ocean farms were formed off every coast. It was twenty years ago, and the deathblow came when the gene teams found ways to grow steaks and pork chops with natural gas and water. Better living through chemistry, and all that.

"You smell the fires last night?" he asked.

I said, "No," because I'd forgotten them. Then I remembered my ride to the store and smelling the grass burning. Sure.

"I smelled them. It was like old times for me." And he laughed. The spider had been crawling down into the pipe for a minute now. I could hear its feet on the metal, then it stopped at the plug and started to cut. I presumed. The cord lay in Johnny Whiteeagle's hand, and he smiled at me and said, "The fires made me think of the reservation. When I was a kid, even younger than you." As if I were nine years old or something.

"The reservation?" I said.

"I'm Lakota," he informed me. His free hand pointed at his considerable body, and he said, "Sioux to you."

"I know," I managed. "Sure." A bad bunch of fellows, I was thinking. We had never completely beaten them. Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse weren't the end of them. When I was a kid, I remembered, they started a little war up in South Dakota. Some snipers, some bombers. A low-grade war, and I had to wonder about my plumber. Maybe he was an old terrorist. It made me stop and think, I can tell you.

A couple of moments passed.

My companion gave a little nod, then asked, "So what do you do for the university? What's this job?"

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I tried explaining. "All this empty country? Cheap and going to waste?" I said, "I'm helping the university make a proposal. It's something nobody's tried before. We want to use genetic engineering and ecological planning—"

"Yeah, I've heard about you. Sure thing!" He was laughing and shaking his head. "Hey, this is great! I mean it! You guys . . . you're the ones trying to put everything back together . . . aren't you? I heard about you the other night, on television—"

"I'm helping with the proposal," I said. "We need funding over a lot of decades . . . if this is going to work at all. . . ."

"It's going to work fine. I've got a feeling." He grinned and told me, "That's so damned neat. I mean it, mister."

I shrugged and smiled. Who was I to ignore praise?

"I'm Johnny Whiteeagle." His free hand shot out, moist and squeezing my hand. "I told my old lady just this morning — I mean this — that something big was going to happen today. I had a feeling." He laughed. He filled my oversized bathroom with sound, then he slapped me on the shoulder. "So what's your name, mister?"

"Aaron."

"Well, Aaron, this is swell."

It was nice to hear. It was nice just to stand there with him and have nothing to do but believe him.

Johnny Whiteeagle bent toward the pipe and listened for a moment. "Sounds done." Then he started retrieving the spider, hand-over-handing the cord while asking me, "What do you do? Work here? At home?"

"Yeah—"

"You've got a computer or something?"

"I'm plugged into the university. Right now, in fact." I nodded and gave my watch a meaningful glance. Assuming I could make changes in the sabertooths before noon, how long until I could run a good twenty-plus-generation simulation?

The spider came out of the pipe. It was covered with the blackest goo I'd ever seen, foul like very old garbage, and Johnny unplugged the cord from the battery and asked, "Can I rinse this clean?" He was already walking, some of the goo dripping to the floor. He dropped the spider into the sink and ran the hottest water, steam in his face and him asking me, "So what're you going to do to the land? How are you going to pull it back to where it started?"

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"We can't. Not after everything." Generations of cultivation and road building and dam building and people. People and more people, I explained, and there were all sorts of problems.

'Oh sure." He had an optimistic stance, legs apart and the scalding water cooking the spider clean. He added soap. He stirred the suds with the handle of my toothbrush. "But you can mostly do it, can't you?"

"With time. And money."

"Oh sure."

"I've got a million other problems to fix first." I began to shift my weight from foot to foot. I looked at my watch again. "I'm running an enormous set of programs on the computers. In Osborne Hall. We've got to show it's possible first, or there won't be any government moneys. Or private moneys, for that matter."

"What? You've got a linkup here?" He turned off the water and dropped my toothbrush into the suds. "Can I look?"

It wasn't really a question.

Johnny was gone. I blinked, and he was out of the room and down the hallway, past the kitchen before I could catch him. I couldn't believe that a man of his bulk and sobriety could move half so fast. "I just have to take a glance. Real quick. It won't take time at all—"

"The thing is—"

"Is this it?" The linkup screen was covered with data. Heavy sabertooth skulls floated beside population estimates, fire estimates, weather projections, and so on. "Hey," said Johnny, "this is neat!"

"Actually," I said, "it's rather confidential."

"Maybe I ought to get a drink then, huh." He looked at me, deadly serious. "Got any in the fridge?"

"I don't think so—"

"Let me check." He found a couple cans of beer, offering me one and opening the other and giggling when the foam dripped to the carpet. "So show me something," he said. "Some other stuff."

What was simple and quick? "Here." I touched buttons, summoning a first-generation map of the state. Fifty years from today, I explained. Assuming everything moved according to the timetable. The big trick was starting with all the facets in balance. Not in their final climax state, no, but at least something stable and workable. "The prairie forming around us now? The tall grasses? They were native a couple hundred years ago,

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but they're not the true native community. Not in the strictest sense. The megafauna will require different vegetations—"

"Yeah?"

"For the past 5 million years, give or take, we've had rich and varied ecosystems. Particularly between the ice ages. Camels and mammoths and pronghorns, all sorts of species. Plus the predators. The lions and cheetahs and sabertooths and short-faced bears—"

"Bears?" he echoed. Nodding.

"We'll need to build the species as we need them. From their close relatives, or from scratch. Each gene team projects a species, and they're locked into computer memory." I gestured. "I test them and try to make corrections, hopefully small ones, and the gene teams get angry and start building new versions."

Johnny kept shaking his head.

"Once started," I admitted, "the project could take centuries—"

"I love it!"

"A lot of it will be public land. For the tourists. They'll come from the coasts and down from space. On holidays and whatnot." I waited for a moment, then said, "Access will be controlled. Small electric planes will silently take the tourists to overlook points and campsites, and the rest of the country will be wilderness. An enormous, fresh-minted wilderness." I didn't mention the enclaves scattered here and there. There would be half a hundred enclaves for the wealthy; a substantial chunk of the start-up costs would come from luxury-minded people. People who would want to leave their descendants parcels of exotic lands and a remarkable solitude. "So," I asked, "what do you think?"

"Where do we live?" asked Johnny.

What did he mean? *We?*

"The Lakota," he told me.

I looked at him, feeling tired and vague and suddenly cranky. Then I glanced at the map, at the estimates of tourists and native residents, and I said nothing. I just stood there.

Johnny finished his beer and crushed the can, and he watched me. He said, "Aaron, you should think about the Lakota here. You know? We were part of the way it was. Back when. Just like those bears and whatever . . . we belong in this thing."

"Do you?" I managed.

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"Sure," he said. He waved the second beer at me, opened it, and wondered, "You sure you don't want it?"

I wasn't thinking about the beer. I told him, "What we're trying to do . . . we're trying to re-create the *substance* of the past 5 million years. And Native Americans — transplanted Asians — didn't arrive in credible numbers until twelve thousand years ago."

He didn't seem to hear me.

"He said, "I'd like to live in that sort of country."

I looked at my watch.

"Hunt and fish and live the good life," he said. "No clocks. No bosses watching over you. No one expecting anything more than meat from you, and shelter. You know what I mean?"

"Listen," I mentioned, "I need to get busy—"

"We're too damned busy; that's what I mean." He giggled and tilted back the can, drinking and then giving a deep belch. "You ought to talk to your bosses. Get them to let me into the picture."

I said, "No." I was really awfully tired.

"No?"

I said, "I can't. Won't."

"Not for me?" He seemed injured. "I come here and do this favor for you, Aaron, and you can't just give me a sliver of all this? What was mine in the first place anyway?"

"No," I told him. I used a hard voice that surprised even me. I said, "The reservations are going to have two choices. Either they stay as they are today and we'll build fences around them, or the Natives can sell out and leave, returning whenever it's possible. Like everyone else. As tourists, and with all the usual restrictions."

Johnny was puzzled. Surprised.

"What's your problem?" he asked. "What's going on?"

I pointed at the screen, saying, "You don't belong *there*. That's what I'm explaining."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm having trouble just fitting the cats into the picture. The goddamn cats!"

"Aaron—?"

"Quit talking as if you know me!" I snapped.

He made a small sound, saying nothing.

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"A few thousand Natives running around the place," I said, "and you know what would happen? You sure as hell wouldn't be hunting with bows and arrows, would you? You'd starve if you had to do that."

"So I'd use my rifle. I'd just take what I needed—"

"You sure didn't take what you needed twelve thousand years ago. You didn't!" I said, "Your ancestors crossed over here at the end of the Ice Age, and you know what happened? The megafauna went extinct. In almost every case. Mammoths. Mastodons. The giant bison and whatever. And that includes the predators and the huge scavengers. They're dead because they didn't know how to cope with you. You slaughtered them, and the changing weather killed the rest, and don't give me any of that red-man-in-tune-with-nature crap. All right?"

He was staring at me, his face blank and hard.

I pulled my hands through my hair. I was shaking in my hands and everywhere. The red pills had me shaking.

Then Johnny Whiteeagle said, "I wasn't talking about being noble," with the smallest, darkest voice possible. "What did I say?"

I sat down. I had to sit.

"Hey," he told me, "I'm a poor guy with problems. O.K. My old lady says I drink too much and I'm lazy . . . but hey, you don't want to hear my story. Do you?"

"I've got my own troubles," I replied. That was the bottom line. "I'm sorry. I've got to get back to work. I'm going to have to ask you to take your tools and leave."

"Yeah." He walked out of the room without another sound. He went to get his mechanical spider, and came out into the living room with his eyes fixed on me, watching me, and there was something showing. I saw something. "You could have acted nice," he told me. "It wouldn't have cost you anything."

"How do you want to be paid?" I started looking for my credit cards, and he said:

"I'll bill you."

So I turned my back to him, feeling his eyes. The apartment door opened and closed, and I listened to him on the stairs and got up and went to the window, watching him appear below me. A battered van was parked on the curb, a shabby white eagle painted on its side. I was still shaking, maybe worse than before. He got into the van and sat motionless, looking

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straight ahead, then he bent and brought a long-necked bottle out of somewhere. He drank and then drank some more, putting down a terrific amount of liquor. Then he started the van and drove out of the sudden cloud of blackish smoke. He didn't look my way once. Not even a glance upward. It felt good to have him ignore me, and I started hoping he would get good and drunk and sleep it off, forgetting everything. Particularly me.

I got back to work after a few minutes.

It took me forever to get into the right mood again, but then things were fine. The trouble with the sabertooths, I learned, wasn't too bad. I made the adjustments in an hour, dropping their intelligence and plugging the new parameters into the memory, then I put the new slow-learning cats into the imaginary landscape. "O.K," I said. "Go."

Everything was up and running. One generation, then two. I watched slivers and wisps of the whole, at triple speed. Everything had a certain simplicity. This was a model, after all. The cats and bears were rounded shapes, and the grasses were the same impossible green. Bright and lush. Each element was an elaborate estimate, and I found myself explaining the details to Johnny. For some reason I imagined him standing behind me, looking over my shoulder. "The gene teams will make adjustments according to my recommendations. Then I start over again. It isn't that we want to get everything right. That's not the point. But a good working model is what will impress our investors. The government agencies and the various billionaires." I paused for a minute, then I told him, "If I just had more time, I could be more exotic. But this is pretty good. All things considered."

Three generations. And no troubles yet.

I made a fresh pot of coffee and a sandwich, then I ran my kitchen faucet for a long, long while. As an experiment. I watched the water spin down the drain, and I sighed, going back to the linkup room—

—and finding nothing.

The screen was black. Utterly and profoundly black.

An outage somewhere, I thought. I sat and ate my sandwich, sipping coffee and waiting. Telling myself it was nothing. A power outage down at the campus, and it wasn't the first time. Only, maybe I knew I was fooling myself. Thinking back now, I have to wonder. I just sat there and waited, never checking with the university or listening to the news. I kept telling myself someone had dug into a power cable, and I waited.

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My phone sang out after a long while.

I stood and went to the living room. I can remember every step. I remember the project head shouting at me before the receiver was to my ear, telling me, "We've got some friend of yours here, and he says you'll understand. He says you'll know what this is about!" He said, Aaron." He said, "Do you know what your buddy did? He showed up here and said there was a problem with the building's pipes, and he went up to the top floor and opened a pipe and lowered a fucking pipe bomb down level with the computers—"

"I see," I managed.

"— and it's a goddamn miracle nobody was blown to pieces."

I said nothing.

"The son of a bitch is shitfaced. Do you hear me?"

I nodded.

"Do you hear me?" He said, "He wanted me to call you and give you a message. Are you there?"

"Sure."

"'We did it again.' That's the message. 'The redskins did it again.' Whatever in hell that means!"

"It's bad?" I wondered.

"Oh no, not too bad." He made a cutting sound, then said, "Just everything is lost. Data and the simulations and a fortune in hardward . . . and we're finished, Aaron. I don't know how you pissed him off, but I'll have you know—!"

I hung up on him.

I sat back down in the linkup room, watching the black screen and listening to the phone sing. Then I stopped hearing it. All at once I was pretending that it was a thousand years from now, from here, and I was walking on a green savanna filed with huge herbivores and fierce predators and condors half the size of planes. It was really rather funny, I realized. Funny-strange. All the work I'd done on the project, all the hours invested — the caffeine and the pills and the runaway tensions, too — and this was the first time I'd imagined myself as being part of that landscape. It was so strange to realize that fact, and after a while the phone quit singing, and the room was quiet, and I could smell the faint stink of grass burning somewhere.

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Our cover story by Nebula-award winner Nancy Springer ties together the motifs of the issue: the need for change, for preserving the past, and the effect we have on our environment. The story also brings up a few concerns of its own in a mystic woodland that seems too close to home.

Autumn Mist

By Nancy Springer

SYLVIA STANDS LOOKING out her raw new kitchen window at a distant woodland, when her brother thuds in for coffee. He is the developer, and gave her and her husband a huge break on the price of the split-foyer bi-level in which she greets him. She appreciates his kindness; first homes are not easy to come by. But all she can see in any direction is house, house, house on a hilltop scalped bare. Only through this one window can she see trees.

"Yo, Sis!"

"Hi, Bud." Sylvia does not want to take her gaze away from the treetops glowing in the distance. An autumn mist is rising over them, and perhaps because of the lambency of the autumn leaves themselves, the mist glows as tawny as the trees, seeming of the same substance as the forest, an emanation of the fall woods, a soul rising from something — dying.

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"Whatcha looking at?"

Not wanting to turn away, she points out the gray-gold mist to Bud, who brightens at once.

"That there must be coming off the creek down in Painter Valley." Eagerly, he gets out his maps to show her. Bud loves his maps, and always carries them; he plans the itineraries of his vacations and his workdays well in advance; he has his life's successful course charted out in his mind. "Eight hundred twenty-seven acres, totally undeveloped," he tells Sylvia with zest. "I'm in the process of acquiring it right now."

He will take down the trees .... Wordless, unable to voice her sense of protest, Sylvia looks at his map. It gives no importance to woodlands, indicates no forest. Painter Valley shows as a white space amid the wormwork of roadways. A thin blue line traverses the hiatus, unlabeled. Sylvia fingers it.

"Red Fox Run." Bud supplies the name of the stream. "I'm gonna put in some condos, call the place Fox Run Manor — what do you think? Get rid of the creek in a culvert, maybe put in a little shopping plaza and some mini-storage."

Sylvia feels her chest tighten. All her life she has heard more clearly than most people the echoes in the hollow place-names: Otter River (where no otters have played in a hundred years), Eagle Ridge (where no eagles fly), Beaver Dam Township (where certainly no beavers build dams to flood the Weiner World and bowling alley), Elk Lick Soil Conservation District (where no elk come to lick at the salty clay). Still, being a well-adjusted young modern woman, she has accepted that wolves, wildcats, and bears are extinct in her crowded Eastern state, and that most remaining wildlife is being killed off or driven out. The animals are ghostly presences at the edges of her suburban life, seen mostly in limited-edition decorator plates.

But for her brother to do what he does for a living and then call the results Hawk Hill Village (where no hawk will ever wheel again) or Fox Run Manor (where no fox can den) — this haunts her heart like echoes of wolf wail, owl hoot, eagle cry long gone.

And it is just like Bud. Thoughtless. Takes a Mack truck to stop him once he sets a course. And she can say nothing to criticize him; he has always been a good brother to her.

Instead, she says, in a voice that comes taut out of her constricted

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chest and throat, "Why hasn't it been developed before?"

Bud shrugs. "Never got cleared. Too steep for farmland. But that don't make no difference to me. Earthmovers." He grins.

"Never been farmed? I thought maybe it was named after the original settler." Though she knows no area family named Painter.

Bud eyes her blankly; he does not care how Painter Valley got its name, or about place-names in general except for the classy ones that help sell his development homes. He gulps coffee and slams on his way. Sylvia stares out her kitchen window at autumn mist vanishing like a wild thing.

To heck with a schedule full of errands. To heck with job hunting, and the boxes still not unpacked can remain that way a day longer. Soon the distant treetops will be gone, but now they shine bright as a wolf's yellow eyes; it is magnificent maize-colored Indian summer, and blue jeans and hiking boots are waiting in the bedroom closet.

In a few minutes, Sylvia is in them and headed out to see Painter Valley before her brother can destroy it.

There is no access road, she finds after half an hour of driving around. No trails that she can see, and not really any place to park. The closest approach is by the Hawk Hill Village perimeter road, which skirts the edge of the rugged valley for a few hundred yards, then veers away. Tall woods crowd one roadside. Recklessly, Sylvia parks on the berm of the other. There does not seem to be much traffic back here at her development's underbelly; perhaps no one will sideswipe her.

Resolutely, she turns her back on the car and steps into deep forest.

Down, down, steeply down between boulders and deadfalls and dense tangles of bramble; and somewhere the sun is blazing, but here beneath the looming gray-brown trunks, all is a twilight confusion. Ground, air, sky — it is all shadow and leaf confetti, a fall-forest blizzard that dazzles the eye and hides the way. Sylvia stumbles against a snaking root concealed under leaf litter, catches herself against a rough tree trunk. Her hands sting from the impact. Overhead, crows loudly bark.

"Shut up, crows," Sylvia complains. Aside from being one who stares at treetops, she is the sort of person who greets stray cats and asks them how they are, who talks to animals and pictures and sometimes to herself. Walking deeper into Painter Valley, she reminds herself to be quiet if she wants to see deer. But the crows keep calling, *Intruder! Intruder!* From the

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bole of a huge oak, a squirrel rages at her, and Sylvia gives up on being quiet. "For crying out loud," she grumbles at the squirrel. "You hush, too."

Overhead, trees roar, the enormous trunks sway as if in a gale — is there so much wind? Sylvia did not notice wind before .... Close by her, wood caterwauls like fingernails on slate, making her shudder and flinch back. Next moment a rotting branch whipcracks and lets go, crashing down in front of her. Buff-colored fungi brush her outflung hand as the thing thuds to the loam. Sylvia trembles but grows angry; there is no reason for Painter Valley to be acting this way! Then she thinks of Bud, of his maps and plans, and can no longer feel angry at the doomed forest.

"Listen," she says softly. "It's not him. It's just me. Sylvia Verity DuBois." As she often does when introducing herself to strangers, she gives her full name, which she loves. Her mother was Sylvia Verity before her, and her grandmother, and perhaps other grandmothers, deep and deeper in time.

Wind quiets; roaring and squirrel chitter cease. Even the crows fall silent.

"I am Sylvia,' she says again, because the name gives her a sense of self that is mostly missing from her workaday life, her microwave world. "I am Sylvia. I would never do anything to hurt you."

Slowly, hesitantly, warily, the wild place accepts her into itself, opens up to her its secrets.

She walks down hillsides furred yellow-gray with pine needles. She finds the creek, Red Fox Run, in the valley bottom, and wonders if there are still foxes living in this forest, and sees the long-fingered pawprints of raccoon on the bank, and begins to hope. She finds a hollow full of cream-colored ferns, she sees the marks a buck's antlers have left on a maple sapling; she touches elderberries hanging heavy as grapes. She sees mushrooms white as Communion wafers, red as wax candles, orange and luminous as small autumn moons.

She finds an unexpected meadow where pokeweed rears magenta stems, and sumac raises brick-brown foxtails; where grasses grow waist-high, their heavy seed heads fawn-colored and pendulous. She sees a hawk fly, sunlight hickory-leaf-bright on its wings.

She finds the places where springs seep down mossy slopes, where in springtime, Sylvia somehow knows, bloodroot and hepatica and gentian will bloom. These are rich woods. No stonework encloses the springs; no

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ruins of farmhouse and barn sulk in the valley bottom; no canal or millrace ditches scar Red Fox Run. Oak and elm and chestnut stand enormous, virginal. No humans have ever settled here. Foxes might indeed yet den in this place. Even some larger predator, something silent and stalking and unheard-of in these parts, might yet live in Painter Valley.

Songbirds fly and call and rustle everywhere. Chipmunks scuttle. All is bird dart, leaf drift, whisk of squirrel and warm-breeze waft, bits of life, light, motion, mystery . . . . Sometimes Sylvia seems to see something larger and more shadowy moving, far off to one side or the other, something grayish or pebble-tan or tawny ocher, something as fuscous as forest itself, always just at the verge of her vision, preternaturally silent amid the sibilant autumn leaves. Hoping for fox, she turns her head often and quickly. Never does she see the flash of rufous fur. Always the shadow has somehow evaporated into leaf-spangled sunlight.

Sylvia does not feel afraid. She feels achingly happy, and honored by the attentions of her reclusive host: a shy thing, like the shadowy presence in her mind, the plan, keeping its distance, hanging back, timid as the child she once was.

Back at her car in the late afternoon, Sylvia notices that the day has clouded over. Faint from the gray sky, she hears the forlorn voices of wild geese. *Going away*, the distant pipings seem to cry, *going away, soon to be gone, forever gone; forever* . . . . On roadside vines she notices the autumn-colored berries of bittersweet. It is autumn everywhere, bittersweet autumn in the world of wild things.

"I'll try," she whispers to Painter Valley, to the shadowy something in Painter Valley, something no more substantial than mist. "I'll see what I can do."

She does not wait until morning, or she will lose her nerve. She goes home, feeds her husband (the sterile air in the new house, the touch of push buttons and plastic wrap making her soul as well as her skin feel tight, dry), and goes out again, to see Bud.

"You ever been in those woods, Bud?"

"Huh?"

"Painter Valley! Have you ever actually gone there?"

"Why should I? Maps tell me all I need to know."

"Bud, you can't tear up that place!"

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"What you mean, I can't?"

"You just can't!"

For an hour, shaking at times, she says much the same thing in different ways, unable to clearly explain, but for once not letting herself be shushed. Bud laughs, then tries to reason, then argues, then tunes her out. Always gentle, never really listening. Sylvia thinks of possible tactics: a campaign, letters to the editor, picketing of the site? No. She knows her limitations. She is too young, her childhood too recent; she is barely a woman. She does not have strength to quarrel with Bud, to oppose him in such a serious way. Somehow she has to persuade him to agree with her.

"Just come with me tomorrow," she begs, "and see for yourself."

"Aw, Sis! C'mon. You're not making any sense."

"Bud —"

"I've got a full day scheduled. Full week, Full month."

"Bud, *please*!"

It is the next morning, over coffee, before he looks into her haunted eyes and suddenly capitulates. "Oh, what the hell!" Another tawny autumn day, with the mist rising into the sun. "Lead the way, Sis. Let's go see your goddamn woods."

PARTWAY DOWN the first slope, Bud says — very quietly for him — "This place is spooky."

Despite sunshine and the carnival-colored leaves of sassafras, the air hangs heavy in the shadows of the tall pines. Nothing stirs, yet everywhere unseen birds raise strange, plangent cries. Staring around him, Bud blunders against a rotting log fluted with deckle-edged, fox-orange fungi. Some small rodent shrieks and dashes away, making him jump. In front of his face hang cardinal-red tupelo leaves; something lashes through them like a black whip through blood: snake.

Bud shies back with a hoarse shout. The reptile's head sways only inches from his own.

"Stop it!" Sylvia commands the woods. "He's my brother."

The snake pulls back sluggishly. A murmur of leaves wafts through the place, though no breeze blows.

More softly, Sylvia tells Painter Valley, "I want to show him — how beautiful you are. I want him to see, to understand."

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The snake flows away, vanishing as rainwater vanishes into leaf loam. The outcry of birds subsides into brooding silence. Sullenly, Painter Valley lets them enter.

Bud eyes his sister sidelong, as if dubious of her sanity, and says little, and does not really see as she shows him the hillsides, where the Judas tree drops its wine-purple pods; as she shows him the meadow, where the grass tops droop like tan-furred cats' tails; as she shows him the creek, where, in deep pools between boulders, brown trout swim.

"Pure, clear, unpolluted," she scolds, "and you want to put it in a culvert?"

"All right," he accedes, "So maybe I won't bury it. Maybe I'll dam it, put in a lake. Speedboating, waterskiing. Call the place Lakeside Terrace."

Down Red Fox Run, a shadow stirs — perhaps an otter? A mink? A vixen with four small cubs? And Sylvia thinks, *Oh red fox, red fox, red fox, run. Run far away; find some safe den. Some valley where my brother will let you live.* And the forest mutters and rustles, though no wind moves the trees.

Sylvia cries, "Bud, you can't do anything to it! Look at this place! No junk dumped here, not so much as a beer can! Even the yahoos have enough sense to let Painter Valley alone, but you —"

He interrupts, "I can do what I want!" He thrusts his strong-jawed face toward her. "I'll tell you the truth, Sis: I don't like this place. It's creepy. I can't wait to rip it open."

Overhead, the towering trees shiver and start to roar. As if in a storm wind — though no storm looms, no wind blows — as if in a gale, Painter Valley roars.

Bud says sharply, "Let's get out of here." But rather than striding away, he flinches and snaps his head around. "What was that? I thought I saw something move."

Sylvia sees nothing, expects to see nothing where, a moment before, the mist-colored shadow stood. But she knows that the roaring, though vast as the autumn world, is not the roaring of autumn leaves in wind.

Seeming to sound from everywhere and nowhere, from the rich brown ground, the ancient hillside stones, the leaf-meal sky, thundering as if in the distance, bellowing closer full throat and shaking the world like ten thousand stampeding ghostly bison, muttering away again but never ceasing, seemingly without source — comes that roar, too vast to be

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called voice.

But then the voice of Painter Valley speaks.

Overhead, something shrieks like a Sabbath of devils. Far off, something screams like a woman betrayed by her demon lover. Much nearer, something sobs and wails like a baby abandoned to die.

Bud stands white-faced and trembling, unable to run; whichever way he turns, some unearthly cry confronts him.

"Please," Sylvia begs Painter Valley, "please don't hurt him. He is my brother. I'll talk some sense into him somehow; I promise you." She takes Bud by the hand. "I am Sylvia," she whispers, invoking the power of her name, her talisman, less than half understood but wholly potent, and she leads her brother up the steep hills, out of the deep valley; and the shadowy screamings give way before them, then end in a savage, grunting snarl.

Brother and sister do not speak or look at each other in the car. Bud goes home with no more than a flap of the hand. But the next morning, drinking his coffee, he is filled with indignation and grandiose plans.

"It was some kind of damn bird, probably, making those noises. I'll get exterminators in there. Poison the things."

"Bud, forget it. You're not going in there." Standing at the kitchen window, looking out, Sylvia speaks without heat, but with a quiet, settled certainty.

"The hell I'm not. I'll get together a bunch of my buddies with guns," Bud declares. "Guns and bird dogs. Or a goddamn priest, if that's what it's gonna take! I —"

"Just forget it, I'm telling you," Sylvia interrupts, tender but exasperated. "Come here. Look."

He gets up and stands by her at the window, looking out at the distant treetops, at the autumn mist rising over Painter Valley.

Tawny, creamy-fawn-colored, fallow in the aureate morning light, it lies spiritous over its domain, its long, thick-furred tail curled around still haunches, its mighty paws quiet, fog-soft, claws sheathed but by no means clipped. Living, it could stalk through its valley like a ghost, without a sound, or run faster than a forest fire. It could leap four times its length, drag four times its weight, kill a buck deer with a single blow and take the body up a tree. Now it remembers storm, fever, rivals, flood, humans, injury, humans and their guns, humans .... Cornered, it faces once again

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that mortal threat. Across the distance of too many lifetimes, it lifts its slant-eyed head, shows its teeth in a silent snarl. Sylvia watches the narrow, leaf-yellow eyes, the moist gape, the white distant glint of fangs.

"See?" she says to Bud.

He sees, though not yet ready to admit it. He stammers, "I don't — I can't — what the hell is that?"

"The settlers called them painters," Sylvia says, "or panthers." In a dreamy voice, she recites the many names. "Or puma, cougar, king cat, mountain screamer, catamount, silver lion, mountain lion. But mostly painters. Do you see?"

Bud sputters, "You mean to tell me there are mountain lions down there?"

"One, I think. One big mountain lion. But not the kind you can kill with a gun."

Silence. Mist swirls, vanishes into sunshine bright as a woodland autumn.

Bud says sullenly, "I didn't see nothing."

"Of course not. Are you going to leave Painter Valley alone?"

Without answering, he turns and strides out the door. On his way he pulls the map out of his shirt pocket and tosses it into the trash.

Sylvia watches after him with a bittersweet smile until he is gone. Then she starts putting things into boxes. She knows herself better now. She is Sylvia Verity DuBois, and a woodland goddess — no matter how many generations removed from her venerators — a woodland goddess cannot live on a hilltop where the hawks don't wheel, where the trees have been scalped away.

As she works, her eyes look far away — eyes very old, very wise, deep and soft and the color of autumn mist.

ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

Malgorzata Rapnicka was born in Poland and graduated from the School of Graphic Arts at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. Her paintings have been exhibited in Poland, France, Switzerland, Japan, Austria and in the United States. A painter of landscapes, still life, flowers and portraits, she lives in Paris. This is her first cover for *Fantasy & Science Fiction*.

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Sometimes change occurs because of choices. Elizabeth Engstrom explores the nature of choice in "The Pan Man." Betsy, an Oregonian, has written a number of novels. The most recent, Lizzie, just appeared in hardcover.

The Pan Man

By Elizabeth Engstrom

WHEN CONSTANCE AWOKE to the crowing of the rooster, the sun was already flooding through the windows. She stretched luxuriously, feeling guilty for sleeping so late, especially since it looked to be a wonderfully unseasonable, springlike day.

She got up, wrapped her robe around her, slid her feet into the lambskin slippers, and padded into the kitchen. She stoked the fire and set the kettle on, then made her morning trek to the outhouse.

It was a beautiful say, she noticed. A glorious day.

The three sheep looked up, expecting their due of hay, the chickens scurried around, and the cat walked with her. It was so different with Jim gone.

When Jim was home, which was all the time except when he went hunting twice a year, he did most of the chores. He got up well before dawn, fed the livestock, started the fire, and usually had breakfast

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cooking by the time she got out of bed.

It was a luxury, really, to sleep in so late and feed the animals at a leisurely pace.

There was much to do yet. While Jim dealt with the firewood, Constance was in charge of splitting kindling. And she had the week's bread to bake, and it was a perfect day to do laundry and hang it out in the sun.

But the beauty of the day after a cold and stormy winter made her a little dreamy, and a little lazy, and by the time she had finished in the outhouse and was making her way back to the cabin, she had decided to set aside at least an hour to sit in the sun and spin.

Spinning the fleeces from the sheep was the winter job. All winter long, she dealt with those fleeces, washing, dyeing, carding, and then spinning and knitting. This winter she'd made each of them bulky sweaters and long johns, and that was necessary work, but the spinning was such a wonderful pastime, she would relish a little sunshine and a little spinning, where the contented dreams of her imagination could wind on and on, just like the yarn she made. She'd never be able to afford such a luxury when Jim was home, and even though getting in the meat was a lot of work for him, she knew he enjoyed his three-day trips away with his friends.

Having decided to spend a little time in solitary pleasure with her spinning wheel, Constance went about her chores with a purpose in mind. She opened all the windows to let the fresh air in, fed the animals, mixed the bread, then swept the cabin and beat the rugs as it raised. She washed clothes while it raised for the second time, and chopped wood to heat up the oven.

Then, when it was finally in for the baking, she took her spinning wheel and a kitchen chair out onto the old wooden porch. The sun was warm, and even though the air up in the Cascade Mountains was always cold, and chilly now in February, she took off her sweater, leaving only a thin cotton dress, so her pale white arms could see the sun. Jim would never approve. He would want her dressed in woolens anyway, just because the calendar still read February. But Jim wasn't home.

She chose wool she'd dyed with Queen Anne's lace, a weed, really, that was abundant around the cabin. The wool was a lovely yellow-green, and she set to treadling the wheel and spinning the yarn. This would be knit into a little coat for their baby, she thought, whenever the

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good Lord found fit to bless them with one.

The spinning wheel ran smoothly, and the sun beat down warmly, and Constance thought back to their first arrival in the woods. They had lived in a tent while Jim cleared the land, loving every moment of it. And in the two years they'd been here, many things had changed, but her love of her husband and their love of this land hadn't. And probably never would.

Birds twittered and darted in front of the cabin, picking up little pieces of straw to build nests, and Constance spun on.

She saw the grass turn green in front of her, and little wildflowers and the bulbs she'd planted in the fall grew. She felt the wool slide through her fingers in an even, fine thread, and she dreamed of the family they would someday have.

And then she heard the bells.

Her father was a minister down in California, and some proud, rich man who'd come to love the Lord had given him a set of three beautiful bells to ring of a Sunday morning. And the reverend rang them with glee, summoning everyone within earshot to the House of Worship for Sunday services. They were huge bells, each hanging from its own tripod of lodgepole pine. They weren't only beautiful; they were glorious-sounding bells, with a rich, deep tone. Her papa's ministry increased about sevenfold after that, and he grew wealthy off the goodness of the Lord and their congregation.

Constance heard the bells as she sat on her front porch and spun.

Papa was a good man, she thought, and she remembered her daily Bible lessons, and she remembered her mama before she died. Her mama was a soft, loving woman who was always putting the coffeepot on in the middle of the night to help some neighbor in distress. There were always neighbors in distress, it seemed. Too bad Constance and Jim didn't have any neighbors. She'd like to help them the way her mama had.

Constance heard the bells; they seemed to be getting louder. The bells. The glorious bells.

Daddy would ring those bells early on Sunday morning, while he was still in his nightshirt. Mama would open the window and say, "Hush that, now, it isn't proper. You'll wake the dead." And Daddy would say, "Good. Then maybe they'll come to church, too."

So, once awake, the townspeople had nothing better to do than to come

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to church. Mama stopped complaining after a couple of weeks of heavy collection trays.

And all of Constance's friends would come. They'd have their ribbons and bows and lace and new shoes. They'd sit in the third pew, and since she was the minister's daughter, she always had to wear her gloves, but she took them off as soon as the service got under way. The girls would sit and giggle and look around at the boys while the sound of her father's powerful voice went on and on.

One by one, those girls found boyfriends and got married. And Constance didn't find anyone she liked for a long, long time. And then, of course, her mama died, and she had to help her daddy, and she had to play the piano in church and wash his clothes and bake his bread, wondering day by day if spinsterhood was to be her lot in life.

And then Big Jim O'Connor came to church one day. Constance took one look and lost her heart. And she married him the next Sunday after church, and he moved her to this land he'd staked in the Cascade Mountains high in the Oregon Territory.

Her girlfriends rang those bells for her as she and Jim rode off on horseback to their new home that Sunday afternoon. They rang those bells and rang those bells, and Constance cried because it might be the last time she'd ever hear those bells . . . until now, that is. Constance could hear those bells now as she sat and spun the yarn for her mama's grandchild; in fact, the bells kept getting louder and louder. Tears she never had time for began to pour out of her heart. Tears for her mama, tears for her papa, alone down in California, just him and his Bible and his bells. Tears for the womb that had remained empty for two years, tears for love of the land, love of her man, yet with the sadness that her wonderful childhood of giggles and play had gone forever. In its place was the work of a woman, the load of responsibility.

Constance cried and spun and listened to the bells. They were nearer now, yet softer. She cried and heard the bees and felt the hot sun and watched the wheel spin around and around; and the grass was green, and the wind whooshed in the pines, and she laughed and cried and spun, and those bells, those bells, those glorious bells.

She looked up, and a man stood in front of her.

"Daddy?" Her hand whipped out and stopped her wheel.

But it wasn't her daddy; it was a stranger, come up the path, and she

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was so busy with laughing and crying and spinning that she'd let danger enter her world.

"No, ma'am," he said with a soft voice, and Constance turned her chair over in a scramble to get up and get away from him. Jim had left his loaded shotgun next to the door in the kitchen. Constance backed toward it, wiping the tears from her vision. The man certainly seemed to be no threat, and yet. . . .

"Pardon me for giving you a start. Usually people hear me coming from a mile or so away."

The man was wearing a leather harness fitted with hooks, and hanging from those hooks were cast-iron pots. He was covered with cast-iron pots and pans and lids. He lifted his arms, and they touched, bonging softly. He turned around, and Constance heard the bells of her father's church.

"Name's C. Crickett Wilson, ma'am. I make the finest cookware in the territory."

Constance knew she should continue to back toward the kitchen door, reach inside, grab that gun, and run this peddler off their land. How dare he come sneaking around!

Yet he didn't exactly sneak up on her; he couldn't really, not with all those cast-iron pots hanging on him. And he looked gentle; he was certainly soft-spoken. She leaned against the house.

"Is your husband at home?"

"He's out cutting wood. He should be back anytime," Constance said, hoping he couldn't read the lie in her face.

"Well, then, may I take a moment of your time to show you my fine wares?" C. Crickett Wilson was perspiring. "And may I have a drink from your well, please?"

"You stay right there," Constance said, and it sounded like a halfhearted attempt at a threat, and somehow she was ashamed. She went inside, leaving the door open, and she looked at that shotgun and touched it, and decided she didn't need it. She dipped a cup of water, slipped into her sweater, and returned to the front porch. Mr. Wilson stayed put, just as she told him.

"Much obliged," he said as he drank the water down. He smacked his lips and handed back the cup with a smile. Then he took off his hat and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. The pots rang. He cleared his voice. "Now, then." He removed a dutch oven from its hook on his

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When she touched the pot, the world turned dark, discordant, threatening.

right shoulder. "A right stewpot. Ain't she a beauty?" He held it out to her.

Constance knew she shouldn't be talking to this Mr. Wilson while Jim was away, but he was such a nice gent, and he walked all the way up here just to see her — she couldn't just turn him away without giving his wares a complete looking over, now, could she? She stepped forward.

"Maybe you better have a seat, ma'am."

Constance looked at him, but she sensed that he knew what he was saying, so she righted her chair and sat down. She was still looking down on him from the porch as he stood in the dirt. She still felt like she had the advantage. C. Crickett Wilson handed the pot up to her. She held out her hands.

And when she touched it, the world turned dark, discordant, threatening. The pot fell from her hands as Constance gasped and recoiled.

The pan man's eyes were green, she noticed. Green and deep-set. They were squinting at her.

"No good, huh? Well, not everybody matches up with every pan."

Constance looked at the dutch oven that had landed upside down on her porch. She moved her foot away from the oven as if it would bite.

Mr. Wilson began removing his pans one at a time, polishing them with a chamois he pulled from his pocket, and then stacking them on the porch. Each time he took a pan from its hook, he squinted up at Constance.

"We don't want anything too heavy, now, do we?" He kept up a comforting banter as he went through these practiced motions, but Constance had missed most of his words. Her heart was still pounding from the very strange experience she'd just had. She wondered if she was sick. She felt her forehead. Perspiring, but not feverish. What on earth could have made her feel that odd way? She ought to tell this peddler to be on his way. They weren't in the market for cookware; they had no money.

Constance felt that her shaky knees would support her, and started to stand, holding to the back of her chair. She should lie down, just in case it was something serious.

"Please, please, just a moment more," he said. "I know I've got something here for you."

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Constance sat down again, knowing she would be rid of him in a moment. If she ever felt that dizzy again, experienced that horrible nosedive into swirling black poisonousness. . . .

"This." Mr. Wilson held up a small, flat pan. "My omelette pan. Do you have chickens?" He squinted up at her.

Constance nodded.

"Make your husband an omelette he'd never forget with this one." He gave it a final wipe with his cloth, then handed it up to her, squinting.

The pan had an energy of its own; Constance could feel it before she touched it. Then she took the round griddle from him and began to giggle. It tickled. She looked at the pan and wondered how in the world someone could make an omelette on such a silly pan, and giggled and giggled, and then the pan man tried to take it away from her, and his face was so serious that she just had to laugh. He had these absurd little eyebrows that kind of tented up over his eyes, and he'd missed a place when he'd shaved this morning, and she held her sides and laughed, the pan banging on her chair, and she felt weak all over again from the giggles.

He wrested the pan from her grasp, though, and she was left to wipe her eyes and her nose and wonder at the mirth that came and went so fast.

Such an odd morning, Constance thought.

". . . pride myself on suiting the pan to the customer," Wilson was saying, "but not even a lid would tone down that terrible giddiness. . . . Here." And he thrust a little long-handled cup at her.

It felt warm and comfortable. "It's lovely," Constance said. She wanted to just sit and hold it. The cup was so finely crafted; it gave her such a sense of peace. . . .

Mr. Wilson peered at her. "You like it?"

"Oh yes. It has. . . ." She felt a loss of words.

"Balance."

"Yes. Balance." Constance looked around. It seemed as if the day just became a little bit nicer, the colors a little brighter, hope a little higher.

"Do you like it?"

Mr. Wilson's question brought her back to earth. She held it out to him. "Yes, of course. I'd love to have such a ladle, but I'm afraid I have no money."

"I don't trade in money, my dear. If you like the cup and it suits you, then it is yours. Let me just look it over. . . ."

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He took the ladle from her, produced a flannel cloth from somewhere under all his pans, and began to rub it.

I could never take this from a strange man, she thought. What on earth would Jim have to say about that? He never even wanted her speaking to strangers.

"Uh-oh," Mr. Wilson said. "This cup has a crack in it." He smiled at her. "Can't have flawed merchandise, nosir. It's unpredictable; that's the problem. Can't never tell. . . ." He set it on the step and began bonging around his wares, looking for something.

"That's fine, Mr. Wilson," Constance said as she stood up slowly and backed toward the door. "We're not interested in any cookware now, really we're not."

"Oh? Did I tell you? It's not a matter of money."

"Yes, you did, and I thank you for coming all the way up here, but I really must insist you go now. My husband will be home at any moment."

"Aha." Mr. Wilson unhooked a loaf pan and held it out to her. "Here's a beauty," he said.

Constance looked at the little man. He certainly seemed harmless. And her loaf pans were almost beyond salvage. She had planned to get a new one the next time Jim took her to town. This one was cast iron; it would last forever. How she missed her mother's cast-iron cookware! In spite of herself, she stepped closer again to Mr. Wilson and held out her hands.

The loaf pan, when she looked at it, was ordinary. Black, loaf-shaped, with a lip at one end where it could be hung on a nail. But it was anything but ordinary in her hands. It felt fluid. It felt strong and utilitarian. She thought she could bake the best bread in the world with this pan. She thought she could provide hearty nutrition for Jim and their family-to-be with no other tool, no other implement, nothing else, nothing else but this loaf pan. This marvelous, marvelous loaf pan.

"I must have it," she said.

"Good. Good. Well, then, for another drink of water from your well, it is yours. And I'll be on my way."

"I must pay you."

"The pleasure on your face is pay enough for me."

"We don't take charity in this house."

"My dear, my dear, what I am offering you is not charity, not at all.

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It's a gift. It would please me if you took this pan as a gift from me. I make these pans myself. Each one is personal. Each one is individual, just like my customers. And I seek out the people who need them, and I match them up with one of my creations."

Constance just stared at him.

"Don't you see? This is what I *do*."

"Then I must give you something in return," she said, but he halted her with an upraised palm.

"The pan will exact its own price, missy," he said. "The better the pan, the higher the price. This one here" — he pointed to the loaf pan she held — "is a fine pan, but it won't be too expensive. You'll lose a lamb, perhaps, or maybe your husband won't get that deer he's hunting. I have some that are more expensive, but that one you've got there . . . it's a good choice."

Constance looked over at the sheep, peacefully grazing, and she felt a chill. She pulled the sweater tighter around her shoulders. She wasn't sure she understood the man at all. What an odd little man.

She dipped him another cup of water and watched while he drank it.

"Good luck to you, missy," he said, and started off down the way he'd come up, his pans bonging in a musical rhythm that was very pleasant to the ear.

She took the pan into the house, feeling its energy, feeling the wonderful, comforting weight of it, and she wanted to bake more bread. Immediately.

But she hung the pan on the wall, and vowed that she wouldn't touch it again until it was paid for. She wasn't sure she quite believed the odd little vendor, but then again. . . . She wasn't so sure she should have taken the pan without knowing its exact price, either. She'd keep the whole thing from Jim — that was for sure.

The sky clouded over, and a cold wind blew through the cracks of the cabin. Constance donned a heavy sweater and went outside to bring in her wool and spinning wheel, and that's when she saw it, the ladle. The cracked ladle. The pan man had left it on the step. She grabbed it on her way into the house, and after storing the wool and stashing the wheel, she lit a lantern in the sudden dusk and inspected it.

It still made her feel wonderful when she held it. It was like holding something precious, yet invincible. She felt safe with it in the house. The fears of being alone fled.

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And there was a crack. A little tiny hairline crack from the handle down the cup.

Constance dipped it into the water. It held. It dripped a little bit, maybe, but it was a serviceable utensil.

And the price could not be high at all. Something very, very small. A stubbed toe, perhaps, if there even was a price. Maybe he had thrown it away, and there would be no price.

At any rate, she was happy to have it, and hung it on the wall next to the loaf pan.

She stood back. She had begun a collection of cast-iron cookware. Somehow the cabin finally felt like home.

Jim came home without a deer. Constance tried to be glum about it in front of him, but baked a loaf of nutty wheat bread in her new pan to celebrate. The bread was cooked to perfection, evenly browned and wonderful. Constance thought it tasted better than her other bread, and even Jim commented on it.

And being a busy man, he never asked her about the new loaf pan or the ladle.

But the ladle bothered Constance. It just hung on the wall, and she swore she would not use it until it had been paid for. She tried to believe that it was free, but her father had always taught her that nothing in life was free; everything must be paid for. So on its nail the ladle hung, until she was certain that it was hers to keep.

A thousand times she looked at it, and a thousand times she resisted the impulse to touch it, to hold it, to run her hands over it. It was so *gentle*; it was somehow comforting. She wanted to ladle a hearty stew with it, stew made with her own garden vegetables, and the meat they either raised or hunted themselves. But she left it hanging on the nail.

Spring brought its own set of chores, and with summer came other problems. But the nights were mild and romantic, and as summer waned, Constance knew a growing in her belly.

The cabin felt different after that. Jim was as excited and as thoughtful of her well-being as she was. He began to whittle toys of a long summer evening. He talked to her tummy as if it were already a person, and the way it wiggled around inside, she guessed it really was a real person. How odd for Jim to know it before she did.

They went to town and stayed over until Sunday to go to church, and

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met two ladies who said they'd be pleased to come attend the birth. When her time came, Jim wouldn't have to ride far to fetch some help. They went to that church every Sunday as long as Constance was able, and when she felt she shouldn't ride anymore, those women came up to visit with her and make sure everything was progressing right. Sometimes they would bring her a special tea, sometimes a jar of preserves.

But as the winter set in and the snow began to drift, Constance worried.

"I can do it, Constance," Jim kept reassuring her, and as her ninth month waned, the strange February warmth spread again across the Cascades, the snow melted, and one springlike afternoon, Constance had Jim mount up and ride for the midwives.

She swept the cabin and put on a pot of stew. These things take time, she'd heard, and she sat down every time the baby pulled on her.

By the time Jim returned with the ladies, the stew was bubbling happily, and the baby was close.

"Heat some water," someone told Jim, and it kept him busy, while the other hung a sheet from the ceiling to make a little private room for Constance and the baby.

Little Jimmy came into the world with a sploosh and a cry, and Constance reached down and picked up her beautiful, beautiful son. She opened her dress and let him nurse, while the ladies fussed over her bedding and the swaddling. Holding him gave her such a calm feeling, it was like holding something precious and invincible.

When everything was settled down, and the baby had fallen asleep, Constance was starving. She had Jim take down the curtain partition. "Offer the ladies some stew, Jim," she said.

He got the bowls down from the shelf.

She looked down at her son, at the hairline crack that ran through the side of his nose to his lip, parting it all the way through his tender little gums.

"You can use that ladle," Constance said. "It's finally paid for."

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

THE LEGACY OF WINE

I AM SOMETIMES accused of being a scientist. I can't actually deny this because I have the basic credentials. That is, I have a doctorate in chemistry and I bear the title of "Professor of Biochemistry" at a first-class medical school.

But that ends it. I haven't worked at being a scientist since 1958, and even in the period from 1942 to 1958, when I did work as a professional chemist, I accomplished virtually nothing.

Somewhat to my own astonishment, I turned out to be a complete failure in research; and it is to my credit, I think, that I recognized that little fact quite early in the game. I was the living embodiment of the old bromide, "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach."

I began to concentrate on teaching and quickly realized that there, at least, I was world-class. The medical school kicked me out for spending my time teaching instead of researching (though I stubbornly held on to my title) but I continued teaching in my lectures and in my books.*

Teaching is, I suppose, a second-class occupation for a scientist and will never win me a Nobel Prize, but I have always felt it was far better to be a first-rate teacher than to be a mediocre researcher. I tried to explain that to the director of the Medical School, with the accompanying statement that if there was one thing the school didn't need, it was one more mediocre researcher — which got him furious, for some unaccountable reason, and made it certain I would be fired.

But I'm satisfied. I have had uncounted numbers of young people tell me they were introduced to science by my books and that it was those books that persuaded them to tackle a scientific career of

* *I also turned out to be a very good writer, but that's beside the point.*

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their own. And if I have never accomplished anything in science myself, I am certain that many of my intellectual children have and will.

In the days when I was working as a mediocre researcher, my field of specialization was enzymes. In fact, my Ph.D. dissertation dealt with an enzyme named tyrosinase, and the title of that dissertation (hold your breath now) was: "The Kinetics of the Reaction Inactivation of Tyrosinase During Its Catalysis of the Aerobic Oxidation of Catechol." It was not one of my catchier titles.

I have always thought of that dissertation as probably the least important ever written in the chemical sciences, and I've even been a little proud of that. It's a distinction, after all.

In honor of that dissertation, written 43 years ago, I think I ought to devote one of my essays in this series to enzymes. Here goes:

The story of enzymes begins with an accidental prehistoric discovery that must have been made in numerous places. In the absence of refrigeration, fruits and moistened grain would sometimes undergo peculiar changes. The process eventually came to be called "fermentation" from a Latin word for "boil" because, in the process, bubbles of gas formed.

Driven by thirst or hunger, human beings sometimes ate the fermented material and found, to their delight, that: a) it tasted good, and b) it made them feel good, if taken in moderation. What prehistoric people didn't know was that water was frequently contaminated with disease-producing microorganisms that would not live in wine or beer, so that it was actually safer to drink the fermented material than ordinary water.

Nor was this an entirely human phenomenon, for birds and mammals would sometimes greedily feed on fermented fruits and show all the signs of happy intoxication.

Flour could also be made to ferment, and the appearance of bubbles would puff it up so that it could be baked into soft, porous bread, rather than into a flat, hard substance.

By 1800 B.C., fermented drinks had come to be so popular that special laws had to be enacted to dictate the handling of misdeeds committed under the influence of too much beer.

What's more, it was discovered that if a little of the fermenting fruit juice was added to fresh fruit juice, the new batch would ferment quickly. It was assumed that there was a substance called a "ferment" in the fermenting material that

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would do the trick.

A bit of bread being raised by fermentation, if added to a new batch of flour, would quickly cause it to rise, too. The material in the fermenting bread that did this came to be called "leaven" from a Latin word meaning "to raise." Thus, we speak of "leavened bread" (the ordinary bread we eat) and "unleavened bread" (the matzos eaten by observant Jews during the Passover season).

The ability of leaven to cause the raising of fresh, unleavened flour is referred to by St. Paul as a metaphor for the manner in which the sin of one man can corrupt an otherwise blameless group. "Know ye not," he says, "that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" (1 Corinthians 5:6).

Another name for "leaven," by the way, is "yeast," which has been traced back to a Sanskrit word meaning "to boil." This has come to be the most common name for leaven and ferment.

The ancients, of course, had no idea how grape juice, for instance, was changed into wine. It just happened. The beginning of knowledge in this respect came with the medieval alchemists, some of whom were earnest and capable, and made important discoveries that laid the groundwork for future chemistry.

Alchemists noted that a number of substances, upon heating, would bubble and liberate vapors of "spirits" (from a Latin word meaning, among other things, "vapors"). Gradually, they learned how to trap some of these spirits, cool them, and allow them to condense to liquids.

When they heated wine, they got "spirits of wine." (For this reason, we still speak of alcoholic drinks as "spirits," in consequence.) When the spirits of wine were cooled, what was obtained was something that looked like water but had a winy smell. An even more important difference was that the spirit burned so that one early name for it was "aqua ardens," Latin for "burning water."

The Arabs, who were among the great alchemists of the Middle Ages, referred to very fine metallic powders as "al kohl." What could be finer than the vapors formed by heating some liquid. Therefore, it became possible to speak of "al kohl of wine" rather than "spirits of wine." The phrase "al kohl" became "alcohol." (Nowadays, we know that there are a vast number of different related compounds all of which can be referred to as alcohols. The specific one in wine is "ethyl alcohol" so-called for reasons we don't have to go into here.)

Once the alchemists discovered alcohol, it was not difficult to deter-

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mine that it was the ingredient which produced the intoxicating effect.

Alcohol boils at a lower temperature than water does, so if wine is distilled, more alcohol than water is vaporized to begin with, and the early vapors, if condensed to liquid, contain more alcohol than the original wine did and produce more intoxication.

About 1300, a Spanish alchemist, Arnau de Villanova (1235-1312), distilled wine and produced the stronger liquor, brandy, in the process. (Brandy is a corruption of "brandwine," meaning "fire-wine" probably because it was produced by heating, and also, perhaps, because of its fiery effect on the body.) In the same way, fermenting grain could be distilled to produce "whiskey" (from an old Gaelic word, "usquebaugh").

In the mid-1300s, the worst pandemic on record struck the world. It was a form of the pneumonic plague and was called the "Black Death." It may have killed one-third of humanity, a percentage slaughter greater than anything we know of before or since. It was extremely contagious, and could sometimes kill within twenty-four hours of the appearance of the first cough. Humanity, with no knowledge as to the workings of infectious disease, and with only a dim awareness of personal hygiene, was helpless. The wonder is not that one-third died, but that two-thirds survived.

In any case, people snatched at straws, and the word went about that hard liquor would prevent the infection. People therefore took to drinking the newly discovered brandy and whiskey. It had not the slightest effect on the Black Death, one way or the other, but it made people less concerned about the disease, so it did serve a purpose.

In this way, a pall of intoxication and alcoholism descended upon Europeans and upon those with whom they eventually came into contact. It was a pall that has never lifted.

The study of the process of fermentation was simplified by the French chemist, Antoine Laurent Lavoisier (1734-1794). Instead of working with fruit juice, he worked with a sugar solution. He found that it was the sugar solution, not the fruit juice generally, that was fermented. In the process of fermentation, the sugar was converted to alcohol and to a gas. The latter turned out to be carbon dioxide, well-known by then. It is the bubbles of carbon dioxide that appear in fermenting flour and that raise it to form leavened bread.

Now the question is: What is the yeast that seems to be essential

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to the process of fermentation?

From the facts that a small quantity of yeast can apparently multiply; that "a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump"; that it can be transferred from flour to flour and from juice to juice so that a small quantity can eventually ferment all the fermentable material in the world, one can only conclude that yeast must be alive. How else could it grow in this fashion?

That conclusion is obvious, however, only in hindsight, and hindsight comes only with the passage of time.

To be sure, as long ago as 1676, the Dutch biologist Anton van Leeuwenhoek (1632-1723) had ground tiny lenses, through which he could see living "animalcules" (we call them "microorganisms" today) in pond water. He showed the existence of microscopic forms of life.

However, Leeuwenhoek's microorganisms swam about vigorously while yeast just lay there, so that it was difficult to assume that yeast, too, was a microorganism.

Besides that, the early microscopes were rather crude instruments. Their lenses reflected the different wavelengths of light differently so as to produce tiny spectra, or rainbows. The result was that any attempt to focus sharply on any tiny object always surrounded it with a small halo of colored light and obscured the result. In consequence, many microscopists saw objects that arose largely out of their imagination and reported on them. These could not be confirmed by other microscopists, and the field fell into some disrepute.

It was not until 1830 that the British optician Joseph Jackson Lister (1786-1869) developed an achromatic lens (one that did not produce a spectrum) for use in microscopes. It was only then that such instruments could be used effectively, and, even so, few non-microscopists cared to take microscopic data at face value.

Many chemists, then, dismissed the possibility that yeast, which made its appearance as a quiescent sediment, with no more obvious life in it than a layer of mud, could possibly consist of living microorganisms. Instead, they looked for a straightforward chemical explanation of fermentation.

Outstanding among these was the German chemist Justus von Liebig (1803-1873), who did not have a good chemical theory of fermentation, but, by 1839, had worked out a semi-mystical, not very detailed picture of the process. Since he was a great chemist, however, his views carried conviction.

Nevertheless, just a year earlier, in 1838, a French engineer, Charles

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Cagniard de la Tour (1777-1859), had studied yeast under the new achromatic microscope and could see that it was composed of tiny spherules. What was far more important was that some of these spherules were budding, producing other spherules. His conclusion was that yeast was a living, growing microorganism.

In 1839, the German physiologist Theodor A. H. Schwann had advanced the "cell theory" of life, claiming that all life consisted of tiny bits of protoplasm, separated from other such bits by fine membranes. He, independently of Cagniard de la Tour, also recognized the living nature of yeast and proclaimed it to consist of yeast cells.

Chemists still scorned the microscope, however, and remained under the influence of Liebig. Yeast, as a possible life-form, was dismissed for nearly twenty years.

Then came the French chemist Louis Pasteur (1822-1895). He had already established a considerable reputation by 1856, when a representative of the French wine industry asked Pasteur for his help. Wine-making was an art that didn't always work, and for some reason fermenting grape-juice was turning sour and threatening one of the great industries of France.

Pasteur travelled to the wine district with his microscope and studied samples of fermenting juice that were indeed forming wine. He found it contained yeast cells, which he caught in the process of budding, just as Cagniard de la Tour had done eighteen years earlier.

On the other hand, when Pasteur studied fermenting fruit juice that was turning sour, he found that it contained smaller cells that had the capacity of turning sugar into lactic acid (the acid characteristic of sour milk).

It was clear to Pasteur that fermentation was brought about by living cells and that, moreover, there was more than one variety of such cells producing more than one variety of product.

Apparently what happened was this. If both types of cells were present, the ordinary yeast cells would produce the wine and, when enough alcohol was present, it would kill those cells. The smaller cells, however, would remain alive and would act to change the sugar further to lactic acid.

Pasteur suggested the following about 1860. Once the wine was formed, it should be heated gently to 120 F. That would kill the lactic acid producers and the wine would stay sweet. The vintners were horrified at this suggestion, but desperation drove them and they tried it.

It worked! Pasteur had invented the process of "pasteurization."

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(Pasteur went on to generalize his findings and developed the "germ theory of disease." This worked, too, and Pasteur became the most famous scientist in the world.)

Pasteur's demonstration that yeast consisted of living cells was so clear and so irrefutable that the chemists who maintained that yeast was not alive were forced to back down.

Even Liebig had to admit that yeast consisted of living cells. He maintained, however, that what did the work of fermentation was not the living cell itself, but something within it that was not alive and that was the fermenting vehicle.

In this, Liebig was absolutely right, but now it was Pasteur, not he, who bore the weight of prestige, and Pasteur carried the day.

Yet there were examples of non-living ferments that were well-known by 1860.

Yeast was acting as a "catalyst" (see my essay, "The Haste-Makers, F & SF, September 1964). It enormously hastened, by its presence, a reaction that would take place with only glacial slowness in its absence. What's more, yeast, like the typical catalyst, did not seem to take an obvious part in the reaction. The sugar turned to alcohol and carbon dioxide while the yeast remained yeast.

Could this happen only in the presence of living organisms, as Pasteur claimed?

The fermentation of sugar to alcohol, however, is not the only reaction catalyzed in or by life-forms. When grain is fermenting, for instance, the starch granules it contains were converted into sugar molecules. As long before as 1833, a French chemist, Anselme Payen (1795-1871), had found that whatever catalyzed the reaction was present in the watery material surrounding the fermenting grain.

He worked with the watery material and obtained a preparation that contained no living microorganisms in it, but that hastened the conversion of starch to sugar enormously. He called the active principle "diastase" from a Greek word for "separation," presumably because he had separated it from the living cell.

This name eventually established the "-ase" suffix for all organic catalysts of the sort, though a few, isolated very early on, developed names with other suffixes that became too well-known to change.

In 1834, Schwann, who was to help pioneer the notion of yeast as a living microorganism, isolated a material extracted from stomach linings that disintegrated and digested meat. It, too, while obtained from living material, was not itself living. Schwann called the catalyst "pepsin"

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from the Greek word for "digestion," and the name stuck — one of the few organic catalysts that does not have the "-ase" ending.

Diastase and pepsin were examples of "soluble ferments," ferments that were non-living molecules, soluble in water. By 1860, then, when Pasteur had established yeast as a living catalyst, there were not wanting those who maintained that all ferments were actually soluble ones, and that those that did not seem to be so had merely not yet been effectively isolated from the cells within which they were bound. A Polish chemist, Moritz Traube (1826-1894), maintained this, for instance.

Traube's views could not stand up against those of Pasteur, however.

The French chemist Pierre E. M. Berthelot (1827-1907) tackled the yeast-cell bastion. In 1860, he mashed up yeast cells and obtained out of them a soluble ferment that was capable of breaking down sucrose (a double-sugar, familiar to us as ordinary table sugar) into its single-sugar components, glucose and fructose.

Sucrose twists the plane of polarized light in a clockwise direction, while the mixture of glucose and fructose twists it in a counterclockwise direction. The process of breakdown inverts the direction of twist, and Berthelot therefore called his soluble ferment, "invertase." As a result of this experiment, Berthelot was converted to the view that all ferments were non-living, even when they occurred within a living cell.

Pasteur, however, held out. While admitting that invertase was a soluble ferment obtained from yeast, he pointed out that it catalyzed an almost trivial reaction, and had nothing to do with the fermentation of sugar to alcohol which, Pasteur insisted, could only be brought about by the intact cell.

Again, Pasteur prevailed, and chemists continued to make a firm distinction between soluble ferments and cell ferments. In 1878, in fact, the German physiologist, Wilhelm Friedrich Kuhne (1837-1900), suggested that confusion between the two would be eased by the use of different names. The catalytic substances that existed only in intact cells could still be called "ferments," but soluble ferments, he suggested, should be called "enzymes." This was from Greek words meaning "in yeast," since soluble ferments had properties resembling those of ferments in yeast.

(Kuhne was more successful than he could have guessed. His word, enzyme, came eventually to be applied to all ferments, whether

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inside or outside the cell.)

Pasteur died in 1895, with his views still prevailing, but within two years they were completely exploded.

A German bacteriologist, Hans Buchner (1850-1902), was attempting to obtain substances from yeast that would be of immunological interest. He was not in any way concerned with the fermentation process.

The trouble he encountered was that when he mashed up yeast cells, the materials he obtained quickly underwent bacterial decomposition. What he needed was a preservative that would prevent bacterial growth.

He tried a number of preservatives, and one of them was sucrose. A surfeit of sucrose prevents bacterial growth. That's why jams and jellies are prepared. Not only does the high sugar content satisfy our sweet tooth, but it makes it possible to keep them on the shelf indefinitely without refrigeration.

Hans Buchner was shoving sugar into his yeast preparations, therefore, and, being uninterested in fermentation, didn't pay attention to the fact that bubbles were appearing.

Hans, however, had a younger brother, Eduard Buchner (1860-1917). Eduard was a chemist and, while vacationing, he visited his brother and noted the bubble formation in the sugar-filled yeast extract. Eduard, as a chemist, saw the significance of this at once and asked his brother if he might experiment with the material. Hans, who had always been a solicitous and helpful older brother, gave permission at once, and Eduard Buchner got to work.

The younger Buchner's first concern was to break up the yeast cells beyond redemption. To do this, he mixed the yeast with an equal weight of sand, then ground the mixture into a moist and muddy mess.

He wrapped this up in cheesecloth and put it in a hydraulic press that exerted several hundreds of atmospheres of pressure on the material. This burst any cells that had survived the grinding. Buchner next passed the mess through a layer of filter paper to remove any intact cells and cell fragments that, despite everything, might have remained.

In this way, he ended up with what we can only call "yeast juice," which was clear and slightly yellow.

He then added sugar to the yeast juice and, behold!, fermentation began, alcohol was produced, carbon dioxide was evolved, all in the entire absence of life. Buchner had isolated a soluble ferment (actually, as was eventually found, a complex

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mixture of soluble ferments) that catalyzed the fermentation reaction.

This startling demonstration roused considerable opposition, of course, but that opposition faded. The experiment was easily repeated, more and more experimenters obtained Buchner's results, and the whole matter was simply irrefutable.

We can't tell what Pasteur would have said if he had lived, but the Pasteur Institute, which had been established in 1888 in Pasteur's honor, accepted Buchner's work.

In 1907, then, Buchner received the Nobel Prize in chemistry for what he had done. Undoubtedly, his brother would have shared the prize, but he died in 1902, at the age of only 52.

The younger Buchner went on to a tragic end. In 1917, he volunteered for active duty in the German army during World War I. He was 57 at the time, and had no business volunteering. Nor did the German authorities have any business allowing it. However, he joined and died on the Rumanian front within a matter of months, sacrificing a first-class scientific brain to no purpose.

(During the Franco-Prussian war, Louis Pasteur, then 48, tried to volunteer. The French authorities, showing some brains — perhaps the only brains they showed in that disastrous war — gently led him back to the laboratory, telling him that that was where he could best serve France.)

In this way, enzymes, the name now universally used for ferments of all kinds, took up their role in the consciousness of scientists as catalysts that control all the chemical reactions within the living cell. They are the manipulators of life and, in their numbers, see to it that all the reactions mesh in appropriate manner in different species of life, and in different individuals of a species.

Much, however, remains to be discussed.

What are enzymes, chemically, and how do they do their work? I will take that up next month.

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Humorist Esther M. Friesner takes a hard look at her former Ivy League classmates in the following story. "Claim-Jumpin' Woman, You Got a Stake in My Heart" mixes prep school snobbishness with country music and southern hospitality to come up with a blend that is uniquely Friesner.

CLAIM-JUMPIN' WOMAN, YOU GOT A STAKE IN MY HEART

By Esther M. Friesner

HONESTLY, BINKS, OLD man, we'd just love coming over for cocktails. You've simply got the wrong impression. *Everyone* in our — I mean *my* — old set does. Awfully white of you to overlook what people are saying. People will say anything for effect; they'll *do* anything for love, but that's another story. Mine, in fact.

Go on? Of course I'll go on. The whole sordid tale, if you like; it's your quarter. In spite of this *ghastly* hour, I'm still awake enough to know the real reason you've tendered us this invitation. You want the dirt. *Quelle* cowinkydink, Binks. You're dying to know how it happened, aren't you? They all are, but let's keep this just between old frat buddies, *n'est-ce pas*? It's hardly cocktail party chat. For Gawd, for country, and for pity's sake, don't tell the alumni office. No knowing how Mother Yale will react to the

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news, even if I do keep giving the old girl a shitload of *dinero* every year. I always did think *alma mater* meant one mean mother.

Well, all right, you can tell whatever you like to the little woman, but only because Whitney and I go *way* back. I was sleeping with her first. In fact, you owe me one, Binks. Without me, there never would have been a Whitney to glide down the aisle to your eagerly waiting arms. And on the flip side, I wouldn't be in this—situation—if not for your wifey.

She broke my heart, did Whitney M. Webster—yes, I know she's Whitney M. Webster-Winston *now*, Binks, but this was two years ago. We were in our senior year at Yale, it was Christmas break, absolutely *no way* on earth for us to know whether we'd gotten into Harvard Law, and the obligatory holiday pop-in on Mums and Dads about as tempting a prospect as a drug-free vasectomy. You remember how it was. I simply did *not* need my woman calling me up on *Navidad* morning to say, "I'm just *frightfully* sorry, Tripsy, but our engagement is off. I've found someone new." And not a word more; she rang off.

Christmas Day, Binks! When any *sane* woman knows a man is firmly lodged in the bosom of his family, and suicide looks like a damned pleasing prospect. To say nothing of the hangover from Dad's special Yuletide-recipe Bloody Marys. The Bloody's red, and you turn green; so festive. I was *not* prepared. She should have known I'd do something stupid.

Which I did. I made some excuse to the near-and-dear and *flung* myself into the Beemer. Drove *all* the way from Chestnut Hill to Webster's Mills, Georgia, in two days flat, just to—

What's that, Binks? . . . Yes, I said Webster's Mills. You won't have heard of it. Whitney never went back after *that* Christmas — not that I blame her — but the year of which I speak, she was spending the holidays there, at the ancestral *pied-à-terre* with her Daddy. Not that Bentley Webster ever stayed sober long enough to realize that his little girl wasn't another D.T. spawned by an overdose of Chivas and the swimsuit issue of L. L. Bean. Surely by now you know that it's a tradition for Bentley to get as high as a Macy's parade balloon every Thanksgiving, and stay right up there until the big apple comes down in Times Square on New Year's Eve. Of course, having *seen* Webster's Mills, I must say there are worse ways to view it than completely blotto.

It's an utterly hideous little pimple of a Georgia mill town, no bigger

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than a polo pony's poo-poo, but it was good enough for Whitney's great-gumpa to start up the textile plant that kicked off the family fortune.... Oh, thought they were Old Money, did you? That's not the only secret your little wifey's got to tell. Ask her about her darling Mumsy some time—the one you've never met because she's always . . . doing a little charity work in Bermuda, isn't it? Or else ask Whitney M. Webster-Winston what the M. stands for. You'll be surprised. So will I, if she tells you the truth.

All that's beside the point. I certainly don't bear the girl any grudges. Now. Two years ago, it was another kettle of *coq au vin*. Lord, Binks, I wanted to kill her! Then marry her. I didn't see any problem with that, because when love walks in the door, logic flies out your gonads, particularly when the object of your tender feelings has such a superb set of hooters. Passion blinds a man. You know what I mean: I've seen you at The Game when the Bulldogs bite it. Once you even got ketchup on your ecru Versaces; don't deny it. Well, *I* was so peeved about Whitney that I didn't even bother to put the mud screen up when I pulled the Beemer into the center of Webster's Mills.

Which center is, *in toto*—I kid you not — the Bop 'n' Burger Drive-In. People actually *eat* there, though I don't think it's food. It was nighttime when I arrived. A pink-and-yellow neon hamburger twirled lazily round and round at the top of a twenty-foot-high puke-green pole high above that symposium of sorghum fanciers. Below, what wasn't cinder block and asphalt was plastic and chrome. The sound of a jukebox wailed clear across the parking lot. There was nowhere to hide from the strains of "Take Me Closer to Jesus, Elvis." My Gawd, do they *still* manufacture that many denim-blue Ford pickups? I swear, Binks, somewhere someone is making a fucking *fortune* stonewashing trucks. How else could they all have that same air of prefab shabbiness? Between those venerable vehicles and the dented red two-door Chevies cluttering up the Bop 'n' Burger, the old Beemer stuck out like a virgin at Vassar.

Now, mark me, old man, ordinarily I wouldn't be caught dead in such a place. Kitsch went o-u-t simply *ages* ago. But I needed directions. A man can't very well lay his torn and bleeding heart at the feet of *la belle dame sans* timing if he doesn't know where said feet currently are. Whitney's mailing address over break was just The Aspens, Webster's Mills, Georgia, so I did have to do the odd spot of inquiry.

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I leaned against the hood of the Beemer while contemplating which of the locals would understand a question phrased in grammatical English. The atmosphere was not conducive to clearheaded thought. The smell of paleolithic grease emanating from the Bop 'n' Burger kitchen was appalling. The whole parking lot reeked of it. And then, cutting through the miasma of deep-fried possum and sludgeburgers, there came a flying wedge of Tabu cologne that nailed me right between the eyes.

"Take your order, honey?" she said. You may have heard of Georgia peaches, Binks. Well, they're nothing compared to the Georgia honeydews this lady was attempting to conceal under her red cotton blouse; badly. You know I'm a gentleman. I didn't intend to ogle the Edams, but I couldn't help it; they were on eye level. I wondered whether Webster's Mills made a habit of spawning the Fifty-Foot Woman, until I realized that my hayseed Hebe was mounted on a pair of roller skates.

"Actually, I'm just trying to get some information," I told her, to which she replied: "This ain't Ma Bell, sugar. You just order you a Cocola, I'll be real happy to point you any which way you want to go."

Coca Cola; yes, Binks, I know. But for better or worse, that was how I met Miss Rubilene Nash. My mind was on other matters than correcting her quaint pronunciation. She was a vision of delight, old man, either in approach or retreat. Is your Whitney still the ruthlessly articulate girls'-rights advocate I once knew? . . . *Quelle dommage.* Well, then you know she would never have approved of Miss Rubilene's carhop outfit. Why *do* they call them carhops, anyway? One good hop in *that* rig-out, and more than Atlanta would burn.

I managed to hold on to some of the old Apollonian calm when she came skating back with my beverage. After all, I told myself, I was the jilted swain come to pound Sweet Reason back into dear Whitney's skull. It lacks a certain note of moral superiority if one's mouth is full of love's most persuasive rhetoric for one girl while one's loins are full of school spirit for another.

"The Aspens?" she repeated once I posed my question. "You don't mean Bojo Webster's place?"

"The Aspens, dear girl, is the residence of Mr. *Bentley* Webster," I informed her. "And his daughter Whitney," I thought it prudent to add.

"Oh, Whitney," she said. "You must be him." Her lips pursed out in a manner that would have been too delicious but for the fact that she was

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looking at me as if I were an especially cute and furry road kill.

"Him—I mean *he*—who?" I asked. Perhaps she had me confused with a different squashed cat of Whitney's acquaintance.

No such luck. "You're that Yale fella Whitney dumped," she informed me. Her golden brows knotted with the effort of recalling my name. "Gordon Branford III?"

I nodded. Despair made me heedless—my Gawd, if the *working* classes in this guanoburg knew the details of my recent *contretemps d'amour,* what did I have left to lose? I told her to call me Trip.

Never did I see such sympathy in female eyes, Binks; not that I felt like being the object of rural pity. "You poor thing," she said. "Driving all this way for nothing. Honey, unless there's two Whitney Maybelle Websters in this world, you have lost her, and you have lost her for good and all."

Yes, Binks, I've let your little helpmate's secret go whoopsy: *Maybelle.* Perhaps Whitney never saw fit to tell you the too-romantic tale of how her parents met. Mumsy was a waitress at one of the finer resorts on Hilton Head, when Daddy showed up at the bar a teensy bit borneo. When he took out his money clip to pay the tab, the lady saw what she liked, and married it before Bentley sobered up. You *do* know Whitney's words to live by? Either she gets things her way, or somebody dies. Got *that* single-minded spunk from her Mumsy. Also her charming middle name.

But to return: I was not raised to take defeat lightly; not with that much mileage on the Beemer. I drew myself up, adopted an air of dogged determination, and said, "I'll be the judge of that, young lady."

Whereat the toothsome Miss Rubilene burst into giggles. "'Young lady'?" she repeated. "Oh, sugar, if you only knew!"

I didn't. I assumed her mirth stemmed from my perchance inappropriate pomposity coupled with the obvious fact that she looked only a year or so younger than I. Still, *la coeur a sais raisons que la raison ne connaît point,* so I continued to make an ass of myself.

"If you don't know the way to The Aspens, then I'll thank you to say so," I informed her. "I haven't all the time in the world."

She looked chastened at that; sad, at any rate. "Honey," she said, "I could send you off on a wild-goose chase to The Aspens right now, but that wouldn't do you a lick of good. You want to see Miss Whitney, and Miss Whitney's not there. She's right here in this town, not a coon's spit from where we're standing. But if you know what's good for you, you'll

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leave her be, hustle those cute little buns into your fancy car, and hightail it back up North while you still can." And before I could register any pleasure at her evaluation of my *derrière* (it's all that time I spent on the Yale crew; tightens up the old gluteus whatzits *so* well), Miss Rubilene went on to say: "She's Randy Russell's woman now."

The hell she was, I said, which only evoked another of those *poor, ignorant boy* looks from her. Before she could explain, the anthropoid ape who owned the Bop 'n' Burger came out of Hell's kitchen to yell at my winsome informant to quit fraternizing with the damyankees and take orders from the Phil Donahue Fan Club currently cluttering up the parking lot and leaning on their klaxons for service.

Before she whirred away, she managed to whisper to me, "I get off work 'long to'ad midnight. You wait for me, and I'll do what I can to help you. Don't try scooting off on your own after that girl of yours, or you'll be real sorry. My truck's over there. Meet me by it." A scrape of skate wheels, and she was gone.

I strolled over to check out said chariot. It was a sky-blue pickup with a Confederate flag sticker on the windshield and a stuffed Garfield hanging upside down from suction-cup paws in the rear window. There was an "If You're Rich, I'm Single" bumper sticker over the tail pipe, and one saying, "This *Is* My Other Car," for aesthetic and philosophical balance. Thank Gawd it had no gun rack, or I'd never have been able to pick it out of the crowd. I glanced into the back and noted that the lady was obviously a gardening enthusiast. Either that, or the Webster's Mills locals take it literally when they say they're going to dish the dirt.

It lacked but three hours of midnight. It wouldn't have been any skin off my tan to wait for Rubilene. I should have scouted out a local roach motel and checked in for a few hours' bidey-bye in the meanwhile. However, when have you ever known me to do the sage thing, Binks? I was the one who signed up for Organic Chem in freshman year when anyone with half a brain took Gut Psych to fulfill the science requirement. I confess, the undertone of doom in her voice when she spoke of Whitney and this Russell person intrigued me. It was like some divine Wagnerian motif to remind the audience that the gods were going to fall in the Rhine any hour now, so why bother. I should have waited to hear more.

Not I. Now I knew that my rival had a name: Randy Russell. How too, too goober. From the way Rubilene spoke with such assurance of the

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hopelessness of my cause, I gathered that this Russell was a known quantity in those there parts. What is named and known can be hunted down, like a wild skeet. I didn't wait. I drove to the nearest gas station and asked the pump jockey whether he knew the whereabouts of one Randy Russell.

Binks, if you could have seen the fond, lobotomized grin that o'erspread those zitful features, you'd have thought I was offering the lad the chance to evolve into one of the higher primates. "Cowboy Randy Russell," he breathed. "I got just about all his albums. Wish I had me enough money to buy a ticket to his concert tonight, though." He said no more, but gazed at me meaningfully. The implication was clear: aphasia *can* be cured for about twenty dollars in most civilized societies. Isn't science wonderful?

Quasimodo Jukes recked without that fine old Yale tradition that requires all her students, even unto the least of us, to learn how to do research. Usually I'm hard put to deduce breakfast, but love is a great smartener-upper. A concert, was it? And nearby, I should venture to guess, else why would this walking testimony to inbreeding seem so sanguine about obtaining the bribe from me and being able to attend said musical that very evening? Too, hadn't Rubilene just said that Whitney was —how did she phrase it?—less than a coon's spit away? Though I didn't know how far said beast could hawk a lugie, I still had clues aplenty.

I feigned stiff joints, got out of the Beemer, and strolled over to the front window of the filling station while Gasoline Alley Oop continued to blither on about how he had a bad memory for times and places, but *might* be subject to the electroshock of ready green. I let him natter away. Where there are concerts, my dear Binks, there are also adverts for the same posted in plain sight at most local businesses. Sure enough, there among the cans of thirty-weight reposed a placard advertising Cowboy Randy Russell's Homecoming Tour, with a gig at the East Webster's Mills Melodrome in — good Lord, it had begun at nine o'clock! And no doubt Whitney would be there, eyes ashine with socially misplaced *tendresse*. If I wanted to find her and dissuade her from what *had* to be the world's biggest *mésalliance* since Leda and the Swanson TV Dinner, I knew I'd best make tracks. I thanked my informant and absolutely *floored* the Beemer. Pity, really. Now I shall never know his full critical opinion of my Mums's morals.

Oh, I had no trouble finding the Melodrome, despite the fact that East

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Webster's Mills lies north of its patronymic town. It looked like a converted bowling alley. Either that, or all the best odea shall soon sport a giant phosphorescent duckpin atop their *CURRENT ATTRACTION* signs.

Parking was at a premium. Whoever this Cowboy Randy Russell was, I reasoned he must be pulling down a tender dollar. Perhaps Whitney hadn't lost quite so much of her sanity as I suspected, but still . . . a Country-Western singer? Even for New Money, Whitney should have had some pride.

I bought an SRO ticket from a very bored young box-office bimbette and entered the gates of Orphic Hell. The Melodrome was one of these theater-in-the-round bits, where, if the audience didn't like an act, there was no possible escape for the luckless performer as they swarmed the stage from all sides to pick his bones. Cowboy Randy Russell did not seem in any such immediate peril. He sat atop a backless wooden barstool in a puddle of klieg light and grinned at the applauding mob over the hump of his white guitar.

You know, Binks, we men have it all sewn up. When a woman gets as many wrinkles as Russell showed, it's time to look up the number of a good, expensive, discreet plastic surgeon. He was, I believe the term is, *craggy*. Rugged. Weathered and browned as an old saddle, or a cruise director. He had blue eyes of a piercing brightness found only in Louis L'Amour books. The obligatory Stetson atop nigh metallic golden curls, and his smile caused snow blindness in the first four rows. Truly *primo* teeth. He must have been the most popular boy in the bunkhouse until he learned to fight. You could smell the horse sweat clear back to the cheap seats.

"Thank you, folks, thank you very much," he said. "Now, I'd like to dedicate this next number to a very special little lady who couldn't be here tonight." My heart plunged into my Reeboks. Had I come so far —paid cash money — to hear *this*? That Whitney wasn't there? But then he went on to say: "Now, I don't mean for you to get the wrong idea. The lady in question's just a good friend, and we go way back together, but there's only one woman in my heart. A man can't ride two horses with one set of chaps—ain't that so, Miss Whitney?"

I heard a familiar giggle from the front row as he lavished a fond gaze upon my—I mean *your*—beloved. Yes, there she sat. I could catch only a

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glimpse of the back of her head, but I knew it was she. It was the only head of hair present untouched by mousse or Miss Clairol, and sporting a darling little navy grosgrain bow.

Cowboy Randy Russell shifted the white guitar and thumbed his hat farther back on his head. "So this here song's for my old pal and good drinkin' buddy, Miss Rubilene Nash, wherever she may be tonight: 'If Jesus Drove a Semi.'"

If Jesus drove a semi, he'd steer it straight and well.
He'd pick up lonesome hitchhikers bound for the road to Hell.
At each and every truck stop, an angel gets aboard.
It's eighteen-wheel salvation on the semi of the L--

What's that, Binks?... Yes, it *was* necessary to sing. I shall never forget that song so long as I—Anyway, my voice isn't *that* bad. The notes of the second verse were still echoing in my ears as I walked out of the Melodrome like one entranced.

Outside, a breath of cool air washed away the last dregs of Cowboy Randy Russell going on about paying the tolls to Heaven and splitting gas costs with his Savior. I was able to think clearly again, and the first thought that crossed my mind was to snoop about and see whether I couldn't be waiting for the happy couple backstage when the concert was over.

There was no problem about it. The twenty I'd saved on useless information from the grease monkey now went to slick the palm of the bubba guarding the stage door. He pointed me at Cowboy Randy Russell's dressing room as soon as he was able to get his hand out of his pocket. I believe I told him that I was the singer's cousin, though I'd wager that, for another ten, he'd have let me through had I claimed to be the Angel of Death making a house call.

I moved quickly, not wanting to run into any other backstage personnel who might require additional *baksheesh*. The door to Cowboy Randy Russell's dressing room had a chintzy star on it, silvered plastic,, but no lock. I slipped inside and turned on the lights.

There she sat, perched on the edge of the sleekest, blackest, most tasteful and elegant coffin I'd ever seen. Rubilene Nash uncrossed her excellent legs, slid to the floor, and said, "Didn't I tell you to wait for me?"

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I gave her a cool reply: "I am a Yale man. We don't do vampires."

I'm afraid I was still gaping at the body box. You will recall the stories about the great Sarah Bernhardt catching forty winks in a casket, but a Country-Western singer? Astonishment froze me, though I swiftly defrosted under a número uno case of the creepy-crawlies.

"You *can't* mean—" was all I managed to utter.

Rubilene nodded.

"But that's—*kinky*!" I said, my mind still limited to commonplace speculations. "He and Whitney do it *in there*!" I extended a trembling finger at the blue satin interior.

"Of course not!" Rubilene exclaimed. She gave me a look of revulsion. "You Yankees just have the filthiest minds. Do it in a *coffin*? Lord! Cowboy Randy Russell may be a no-account, two-timing, womanizing, undead sumbitch, but by God, he ain't no *pervert*."

Undead, the lady said. Just so. You'll understand why I laughed in her face then, won't you, Binks?

She was even prettier when she was angry. She also had a good right cross, quite staggering even when all it delivered was an openhanded slap. I stopped laughing. "You don't believe me," she said. "Fine. I don't care do you believe or not, just so long as you get the hell out of this room before he comes back. If you don't, you're dead."

I recouped some poise and pulled up the only chair in the room. Slinging one leg athwart the other, I gave her rather a cool reply, viz: "*I* am a Yale man. *We* don't do vampires."

Rubilene rolled her lovely eyes. "I swear, you won't be worth the rope to hang you, boy. You want proof? All right, I'll see can I find some; only, you better be a speed reader is all, because if you're not out of here before the concert's over. . . ." She made the sign of someone cutting off more than my allowance, then flung herself into the large steamer trunk at the foot of the coffin.

I confess to a mounting *malaise*. Consider: This woman had doubtless abandoned her paying job to follow me here and warn me off. Either there was a real vampiric threat to my welfare—in which case I had better do my damnedest to recall how they disposed of Langella in the Broadway

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production of *Dracula,* and I don't think it was bad reviews—else Miss Rubilene Nash was several pearls short of a strand, in which case I was in questionable circumstances of personal safety by being alone with her that way. I was debating flight, when she heaved a thick album out of the trunk and pitched it into my lap.

It was a scrapbook. Some of the reviews dated back over thirty years. There were many photographs among the newspaper clippings. In each and every one, Cowboy Randy Russell was clearly identifiable, surrounded by gaggles of sweet young things. He was also just as clearly the same age, whether snapped in 1950 or 1980. "I thought vampires didn't register on film," I remarked, trying to keep a choirboy tremor out of my voice.

Rubilene snorted. "Cowboy Randy, he's *show* bidness," she said. "You don't just give up being photogenic over a little thing like unnatural life." She spoke with an expert's conviction. I had to believe.

Thirty years, Binks; almost forty, and he hadn't aged. There is just so much that Minoxidil and Retin-A can account for. I stood up, still holding onto the album. "How has he managed to get away with it? Surely someone else must have noticed—? Those closest to him: his agent, his manager, his—toadies? I mean, roadies."

She sighed. "And cut their own throats? Sugar, Cowboy Randy Russell's box office. Long as a man keeps on a-hauling in the green, ain't no one going to ask, like, *uncomfortable* questions 'bout his looks. By the time *do* they think to get suspicious, he maybe fires them and gets new folks on too stupid to find their ass with both hands and a road map. And his fans wouldn't give a gold-plated shit even was he dead and buried, long as he keeps singing."

I considered the phenomenon of Elvis Everlasting and had to concur.

"But you're on to him," I said.

She nodded. "I told him I'd caught wise," she said. "I guess that's what broke us up, him being dead and all. He just laughed."

I was stunned. "He knows *you* know," I said, "and he lets you live?" From what I gathered during an all-night Halloween film festival at Yale, vampires were notoriously tidy when it came to tucking away those who discovered their secret. Permanently.

"You heard him out there," she said. Her lips curved into an embittered smile. "Called me his *pal.* Used to be I was more. I guess you know how when you swear to your *pal* as how you'll keep all his secrets, it's binding."

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Uh-oh, I told myself. A woman scorned, that which Hell hath no Fury like. I pictured the Stetson-sporting beast pulling up to the Bop 'n' Burger and ordering a patty, *ever* so rare, then sweeping poor Rubilene off her wheelies. A celebrity, after all; a Country-Western singer. Poor child, stars in eyes one minute, fangs in her throat the next. And then *el dumpo supremo*. Between the pain of a broken heart and the fear of a broken neck if she squealed, no wonder Rubilene kept silent.

Besides, who in this civic chancre would ever believe her tale of vampires, even if they saw the fatal scrapbook? The *Enquirer* hadn't covered the story yet, nor had *Reader's Digest* touted "My Most Unforgettable Ghoul."

"I'm sorry," I told her. I meant it.

A single tear trickled down her cheek. I lifted it with a fingertip and battled manfully the urge to kiss her. However, doesn't Whitney go on about how *real* men aren't afraid to give in to their emotions now and then? Let no one dare brand me an MCP. I took the lady into my arms and helped my yang side happen.

She pushed me away, but not immediately, and she didn't smack me again. In a deliciously breathless way, she said, "Why, aren't you the sweetest thing." There was a momentary look of cool cunning in her eyes—that special female fluoroscopic vision that can count the contents of your wallet through four layers of clothing—but she doused it quickly. She was a wise woman, my dear Rubilene, and subtle as good wine.

"No need for you to feel sorry for me, sugar," she said. "Though I do appreciate the attention. I'm glad I got shut of Randy before it was too late. I'm just afraid your Whitney isn't going to be so lucky."

Too late indeed. You *do* know the drill when it comes to the hemophagocytic hoi polloi, don't you, Binks? A nip or two does no more harm than mild anemia, but chugalug over the limit, and the victim turns vampire, too. Now I ask you, could you see poor Whitney flittering around the night sky, sucking total strangers? People who were just Not Her Kind? *Princeton* men? Besides, she looks such a bowwow in black, and Bloomie's is so seldom open after dark. Hello, eternal life; ta-ta, charge cards. *Not* a good trade.

I asked Rubilene whether she was certain in her apprehensions. She nodded vigorously and said, "He's going to make her his bride. That means he'll have to take her all the way, make her like he is. He sealed that when

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he gave her a ring on Christmas Day." And she gave me one, too, but it wasn't quite the same. Rubilene shivered. "He's been taking the change nice and slow, kinda savoring it, like, but it can't go any farther 'thout she crosses over. Tonight's the night."

Whitney, the bride of a C&W vampire. My own girl, trapped with that man—that monster—that *music*—for all eternity. The mind boggled. "I must save her," I told Rubilene. "Quickly, where can I get a stake?" She suggested the Grill Room of the Dew Drop Inn on S.R. 47-A, until I explained my strictly vegetarian intentions.

"Through the *heart*?" she exclaimed, making the same face Whitney does when something strikes her as euw, gross.

"It's the only way," I maintained, having flashed on the final scene from *Dracula* in this, my hour of need. I cast about the dressing room, but found nothing remotely stake-ish. Determined, though stupid, I instructed Rubilene to run out and fetch me something apropos while I hid behind the curtains, ready to spring out and prevent the villain from sealing his unholy purpose in Whitney's blood.

Yes, Binks, I *did* talk like that. I was upset.

Rubilene protested, but I stood firm. There were a pair of gingham drapes dangling from the wall behind the coffin—a nice, homey touch, considering that they framed no accompanying window, just a poster of Hank Williams. I shimmied past the long box and yanked them shut before me. It was quite the tight squeeze. I've seen tax men with hearts more capacious than that miserable boxcar of a room, though I grant you perhaps the coffin did contribute to the general claustrophobia. The only way it would fit was wedged between one wall and a dingy, iron-stained sink. I knocked two big, ratty towels off the attached chrome drying rack as I wormed by.

No doubt my voice came somewhat muffled as I instructed Rubilene to replace the towels and get a move on. She crammed them back in place angrily and tried one last time to make me see reason. I remained adamant behind the draperies, refusing even to look at her. I assumed I had convinced her of my determination. I didn't hear her retreating footsteps, but I did hear the dressing room door slam, then silence.

One turns rather philosophical when all one has to stare at is a pattern of itsy-bitsy red-and-white checks. The wall felt cold against my back. It was pure cinder block, covered over with that yucky rubberized paint,

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except where Hank made it crinkly. I dared to part the curtains by a fingertip, just to have something *different* to stare at mindlessly. Thank Gawd we Branfords have always had the aristocrat's slender fingertips, because *that* moment and no other was when Cowboy Randy Russell and Whitney came in.

I froze in place rather than try to jerk back the offending digit. No sense in catching mine enemy's eye with an inopportune flutter of the draperies, *à la* Polonius. We both know what became of *him*. Binks, you would have been proud of me, standing there like one of your Dad's best bird dogs on point. I was entirely rigid.

I wasn't the only one. Impressive. There was no mistaking it, either; not in those jeans. My Gawd, they never do cover *that* aspect of being a vampire in *Dracula*, though I confess to having an inkling. No woman *I* ever knew was willing to settle for a hickey. When Cowboy Randy Russell initially rose from the grave, I know which portion of his anatomy surfaced first, the swine. *Definitely* the undead.

Oh, the pain, Binks! To have to stand there, helpless, and watch my—I mean, *your*—Whitney's clothes drop faster than the Dow Jones. Cowboy Randy Russell was quite the quick-draw man himself. There was a brief vertical scrimmage, and then—I remember being idiotically smug about this and wishing Rubilene could see her words proved wrong—he *did* carry her to the coffin.

I don't know, Binks; does she ever get vocal when you and she—? . . . Well, she never did with *me*, and I was asking out of strictly scientific curiosity. You know she's nothing to me now. Perhaps it was the fact that Cowboy Randy Russell was a singer. He even left that tacky white guitar of his propped up at the foot of the casket. The dear girl must have felt obliged to provide backup group accompaniment so he'd feel at home. Just one *ooooh-wah* after another.

My view of the proceedings was unimpeachably perfect. Lord, do we all look that ludicrous *in flagrante*? You won't catch *me* putting any mirrors on the bedroom ceiling. My palms grew slick with sweat as I gazed down upon them from behind the draperies. I felt like a guest at a funeral giving the dear departed one final goggle and discovering they'd laid out Uncle Randolph in a Chanel tea gown. You wouldn't believe where some people have dimples.

And then, just when I thought someone ought to adjust dear Whitney's

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treble, Cowboy Randy Russell raised himself on his elbows, opened his mouth—Yes, of *course* he had fangs, Binks; what did you think he was going to use on her? A Swiss Army knife corkscrew? Don't interrupt; you're *ruining* the climax—and said, "Now, sugarlips, you're gonna ride with me till God and Satan slap leather at high noon on a dirt street in Eternity."

Well, *that* tore it. I grabbed one of the towels, twisted it into the great-grandfather of all locker-room rattails, and flicked it hard across the foul fiend's Country and Western buttocks.

Gallant? Noble? Heroic? No. I'd call it moronic, if anything. Anyone who saw that creature's blazing red eyes jerk up and fix themselves on me would agree. Homicide would be the least of it. Whitney tried to cast her arms around his neck and get his mind back on business, but *cui bono*? He shook her off like raindrops from a Burberry. He was enraged, and I was dogmeat.

His face contorted into a hellish grimace that I only peripherally recognized as a smile. "Now, why'd you want to go and do a fool thing like that for, son?" he drawled, clambering out of the coffin with disturbing agility.

"It's your own fault," I temporized, still clutching the towel. "Whitney and I have—had—an understanding. Besides, we're Yale, and I cannot in good conscience allow her to form an alliance with one so uncultured as yourself. Did you actually *say*, 'till God and Satan slap leather'? What *have* you been reading?"

From the coffin, Whitney peeped, "He's *Cowboy* Randy Russell, Tripsy. Cowboys are *always* saying cute things like that."

"A cowboy from *Georgia*!" I countered. "Gawd, Whitney, it's bad enough you dumped me for a vampire, but a *poseur*? And you made such a fuss when Buffy got pinned by that Community College yahoo."

Whitney's immaculately French-manicured nails gripped the edge of the coffin. "You won't *tell* Buffs about this, will you, Tripsy? Even after I'm undead? That bitch would put *just* the wrong light on this. Randy and I wouldn't be able to go *anywhere* that mattered."

"I'll think about it," I said coolly. Such a treat to watch her beg.

It didn't last long. I heard a growl in the key of G, and felt a hand heavy with gold rings fall on my shoulder. "Son," said Cowboy Randy Russell, "onliest thing you're gonna have to think about is where we ship the body."

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Which was approximately when the white guitar came smashing down atop his head. He and I both turned simultaneously to see Miss Rubilene Nash standing there holding the splintered neck of the instrument and screaming some pret-ty strong epithets at the vampire. I was too shocked by her Parris Island vocabulary to ask myself where she'd dropped from. I hadn't *heard* the door open, but I'd been a tad distracted, true.

Russell reeled, though more from her guttersnipe words than the blow. You know vampires: bullets won't stop them, so why should a whack upside the skull with a Fender? Now understand, the man was stark raving naked. We're none of us at our most self-possessed in that state. He *cringed*, poor soul, then snatched the towel from my hands and wrapped it around his middle.

"Young lady," he said, wagging a finger at her. "Young lady, this ain't none of your bidness."

"I'll say it is!" Rubilene countered. She cast a positively scoriac eye at Whitney's fair young bod in the coffin. How your darling wifey shrank beneath that glare! "Jesus, Randy," said Rubilene, "bad enough you're trying to murder this poor boy here, but social climbing, too? Think you can take up with Miss Hot Shit On Toast, and that'll make you any better than the backwoods trash you always been?" She shook her head. "Fine time you pick for sucking up to a Webster. I thought higher of you, boy."

Cowboy Randy Russell's avuncular air dropped by the wayside. He was miffed. His eyes went from bright scarlet to Harvard crimson—never a good sign. I tried to sidle away, but there was no space to permit free-lance sidling. Without bothering to look around, he grabbed me by the collar of my best Land's End polo.

I believe I remarked, "Ackh."

He was more voluble. "Time I need your goodwill's long past, Rubilene," he said. "Seems as you've taken a fancy to this candy-ass Yankee. Try telling *me* you're not just as hot to haul yourself up a rung now you got the chance!"

Rubilene lowered her eyes. It was then, for the first time, she murmured those three little words every man so longs to hear: "I love him." These to be swiftly followed by three more, viz: "Drop him, dickhead."

Cowboy Randy Russell only twisted my polo collar a few additional points to starboard. "I'll drop him, honey, soon's he stops breathing."

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Through blurring vision I caught the glimmer of his bared fangs. Rubilene hung back, still clutching the neckpiece of the broken guitar. Could you blame her? She owed her life to this monster's previous forbearance. She was his . . .*pal.* There had to be limits to how far one could push the privileges of such a social connection. I assumed she didn't wish to discover them just yet.

All of which spoke well for Rubilene's prudence, but wasn't doing jack shit to save my neck. Binks, you know I abhor violence, but when your own life's on the line, kicking ass seems like a *darned* good idea. No matter that I knew that a vampire possesses superhuman strength, I would not go gentle into that good night. I hauled back and gave him a right to the jaw.

I don't know which of us was the more shocked: he when that wild punch landed, or I when he shrieked in pain and dropped me. A nasty gash opened up on his cheek, deep and bloodless, but no less impressive. He staggered back, stumbling against the coffin. Whitney uttered a maternal whinny of distress and flung her arms about him, pleading to kiss the boo-boo and make it all better. It was the only favor that woman ever did me, and all unwitting. Her effusions kept him tied up just long enough for me to slip between him and the sink and make for freedom.

Well, almost freedom. He gave a roar and shrugged her aside, shouting, "You goddam sushi-suckin' sumbitch!" Before I could escape the room, he clamped onto my shoulders. I made a fruitless grab for Rubilene's hand, but the vampire spun me around to face him.

"I'm here for you, Trip," I heard her say softly. Her breath stirred the short hairs on my neck. Russell ignored her as unworthy of attention, all his rage focused on me.

"What in hell did you hit me with?" he demanded.

"A—my—the—," I stammered, my hands clenching and unclenching like onanistic starfish. Then I felt it, the thick metal band encircling the third finger of my right hand. You know how some things are always there, so you never really think about them. Like the family trust fund? Briarcliff girls? One's Yale ring? One's *sterling silver* Yale ring? I stared at the monster, and instantly every bit of B-movie lore about silver and its perfectly charming effect on creatures of darkness came flooding through the old brainpan. The scar on his cheek was smoldering. Surprise, surprise, all that silver-bullet bushwa was true.

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"Well, *what!*" he repeated. He was a most persistent fiend, and his breath—? *Mega* yuckorama.

"This," I retorted, and, raising the fist in question, I let him have another paste across the chops. He hit the floor on that one. Now I did seize Rubilene's free hand and yelped something thoroughly original, like: "Let's get out of here!"

She was yanked from my grasp so hard that she dropped the guitar neck. I watched in horror as Cowboy Randy Russell dragged her back toward the coffin. "Traitor," he growled. "We got ways of dealing with your kind." I might well have gotten away then, for all of him. Turning his back on me, he bent her over the crook of one arm, his fangs bared, heedless of Whitney's clamorous objections that he'd sworn to quit sipping around on her. "Now it's *really* all over," he said.

Which it was, but not for her. Never turn your back on a Yale man. I picked up the splintered guitar neck and thrust it home. Easier than I hoped, really. No trouble at all from little details like intervening ribs and spine. Either there's truth to what they say about the strength of desperation, or else that sorry creature had the *worst* case of osteoporosis you'd ever see. When it comes to a reliable source of calcium, Brie beats blood every time. His bones snapped like melba toast, and I skewered the heart on the first try. But it *was* messy. No free lunches, Binks. Whitney fainted.

We left her there. Her late paramour conveniently dwindled to a towel-wrapped pile of primal dust that looked like someone had been dipping snuff a whisker too enthusiastically. No *corpus*, no *habeas*. Whitney would have no trouble from the authorities over the singer's vanishment. The evanescent nature and gypsy habits of *show bidness* people are legendary. Anyway, Webster's Mills was hardly going to make a stereo stink about anything concerning the heir to the town's main industry. I could throw Whitney to the wolves with a clear conscience based on the tacit understanding that cannibalism is *not* a lupine trait. She'd survive. She did, didn't she?

As for Rubilene and myself, we judged it wise to get while the getting was good. We eluded all backstage personnel and slipped unnoted onto the parking lot—empty by now. I followed her truck with the Beemer, assuming that we were heading back to town. I just wanted to put as much distance between my ass and Cowboy Randy Russell's earthly remains as

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possible.

It was well after midnight, most of the Melodrome lights were out, and the asphalt dribble of a state road was illumined only by our headlights. I was too undone by my recent ordeal to do my own navigation. I supposed that soon we would be back in the center of town, and then I could barf my guts up at leisure.

I was taken aback when she pulled the truck off into a roadside picnic grove halfway to Hades, turned off the headlights, and got out. I followed suit, thoroughly disoriented and confused. More so when she sat down at one of the wobbly tables, cradled her head in her arms, and began to cry.

I admit she had reason to. She had just aided and abetted the extinction of that rarest of endangered species, a vampire who knew all the lyrics to "If Jesus Drove a Semi." Too, she must have had some fond memories of the fiend, back in the days when she, and not Whitney, was his—I blush to say it—drinking buddy. My heart went out to her. To think she had done so much, risked everything, for me!

I sat beside her, patted her on the back, stroked her hair, threw a purely companionable arm around her shoulders, lifted her chin and kissed her a bit to cheer her up, loosened any constricting clothing to prevent a faint. She looked a fright, dark circles under her eyes, and they all red; from crying I concluded. At the time I was so preoccupied with cheering her up that I failed to wonder why I could *see* the color of her eyes when we were sitting in total, pitchy dark.

The occasional sob shook her as we kissed. One devolved into a modest burp. Poor child, she was *terribly* embarrassed. She told me that she'd been so caught up in saving my life that she'd missed her dinner entirely. How guilelessly her eyes shone when she said that; how incandescently they crimsoned.

I told her she'd feel better with something in the old tum. Seeing as how much we'd recently meant to one another, and always the sport, I offered to treat her to a bite.

No need. She helped herself.

You know, I *thought* one of those sweet young things in the 1950s photos of Cowboy Randy Russell looked familiar. Ditto in the sixties. And of course *everyone* looked alike in the seventies, even rhinestone carhops, but still. . . . Drinking buddy indeed. Back there in the dressing room, it was almost as if she'd plopped down from some perch among the rafters.

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Traitor, he'd called her. When someone calls you a traitor, it means you both must have played on the same team before. Suddenly all the pieces came together.

Which would have been just fine if Revelation had struck about ten minutes earlier. Fat lot of good it did me then, with Rubilene's fangs more firmly embedded in my throat than my dear Mums is foxholed into the D.A.R. My brilliant deductions, were swept away in the tide of life-memories passing before my eyes. I lost consciousness just as I was weeing in the baptismal font at St. George's Espiscopal.

I woke up the next night covered over with a layer of that good ol' Georgia red clay Rubilene hauled around in back of her pickup for emergencies. I was thirsty; not, I assure you, for another *Cocola.* It was dark, but I was having no problem with night vision. Somewhere in the old mental file cabinet was the spanking new idea that Frequent Flyer had just taken on a whole fresh meaning. Then I saw her anxious face hovering above me.

"You're not mad at me, are you, sugar?" she asked demurely.

What could a gentleman say?

Binks, I married her. Didn't have much choice, did I? And she does love me. It's the crew buns that get 'em, every time, stroke, stroke, stroke. Most of my old crowd developed ingrown previous engagements when the wedding rolled around. They thought I was marrying beneath me, like your wifey's Daddy. Darling Buffy was the first to cut us dead. Ah, if she only knew. There's no saying how much I appreciated you and Whitney attending the ceremony, but I really thought it was in execrable taste for her to pick out that set of *silver* fish-forks as a wedding present. Meow, meow. It's not as if she doesn't know.

Now you do, too.

No, no, no, I won't *hear* of you putting off our date. Rubilene would be utterly crushed. She doesn't handle disappointment at all well. No more do I.

You'll be expecting us seven-ish, then? Good. Mix Bloodies. We'll be there. À bientôt, Binks. Hugs to the little woman.

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Kathe Koja's "Angels in Love" continues our look at domestic nightmares. Kathe's unique style, along with her strong, downtrodden characters, have gained her a lot of notice in a few short years. Her first novel, The Cipher, *has just appeared to great critical reviews, and her short stories continue to dazzle in all the major magazines in the sf field.*

Angels in Love

By Kathe Koja

LIKE WINGS. RAPTUROUS as the muted screams, lush the beating of air through chipboard walls, luscious like sex and, oh my, far more forbidden: whatever it was, Lurleen *knew* it was wrong.

Knew it from the shrieks, gagged and that was no pillow, no sir, no way — she herself was familiar with the gasp of muffled sex, and this was definitely not it. And not — really — kinky, or not in any way *she* knew of, and with a half-shy swagger, Lurleen could admit she had acquaintance of a few. Kiss me here. Let's see some teeth. Harder.

The sounds, arpeggio of groans, that basso almost-unheard thump, thump, rhythmic as a headboard or a set of baritone springs, but that wasn't it, either. Subsonic; felt by the bones. Lying there listening, her own bones tingled, skin rippled light with goose bumps, speculation: who made those strange, strange sounds? Someone with a taste for the rough

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stuff, maybe, someone who liked the doughy strop of flesh. Someone strong. An old boyfriend had used to say she fucked like an angel; she never understood the phrase till now. Her hands, deliberate stroll southward, shimmy of familiar fingers on as-familiar flesh; her own groans in counterpoint to the ones through the walls.

Waking heavy in the morning, green toothpaste spit and trying to brush her hair at the same time, late again. "You're late," Roger would say when she walked in, and she would flip fast through her catalog of excuses — which hadn't he heard lately? — and try to give him something to get her by, thinking all the while of last night's tingle, puzzling again its ultimate source. It was kind of a sexy game to Lurleen, that puzzling; it gave her something to do at work.

Music store. No kind of music she liked, but sometimes it wasn't too bad, and the store itself had a kind of smell that she enjoyed, like a library smell, like something educational was going on. Sheet music, music stands, Roger fussy with customers, turning the stereo on loud and saying stuff like, "But have you heard Spivakov's Bach? Really quite good." Like he had probably heard Bach's Bach and could have suggested a few improvements. Right.

Today she felt dopey and sluggish, simple transactions done twice and twice wrong; Roger was pissed, glowered as she slumped through the day. At quitting time he made a point of pointedly disappearing, not saying good night; sighing, she had to find him, hide-and-seek through the racks. He was a stickler for what he called the pleasantries: Good night, Lurleen. Good night, Roger. Every day.

Finally: hunched behind the order counter, flipping through the day's mail like he hadn't read it nine times already. Lurleen leaned tippy-toe over, flat-handed on the cracking gray laminate: "Good night, Roger."

Chilly nod, like he'd just caught her trying to palm something: "Good night, Lurleen." Waited till she was almost out the door to say, "Lurleen?"

Stopped, impatient keys in hand. "What?"

"We open at ten o'clock. Every day."

Asshole. "See you tomorrow." Not banging the door, giving herself points for it. Outside, her skin warmed, like butter, spread velvet all over. He always kept the fucking store too cold. Like the music'd melt or something if he turned it up past freezing. Rolling all her windows down, singing to the Top 40 station. Stopped at the party store for cigarettes and

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to flirt with the clerk, old guy just about as ugly as Roger, but round where Roger was slack, furry where Roger was not.

"You headin' out tonight?" Sliding the cigarettes across the counter, grinning at her tits. "Have some fun?"

"Oh, I always manage to have fun." Over-shoulder smile as she headed for the door. Roger liked to stare at her tits, too, she was positive; she just hadn't caught him at it yet. Asshole probably went home and jerked off, dreaming about her bouncing around to Bach. And she laughed, a little: who'd been flying solo last night, huh?

But that was different.

In the dark, blind witness to the nightly ravishment, Lurleen, closed eyes, busy hands filling in the blanks, timing herself to the thump and stutter of the rapture beyond the walls. Longer tonight, ecstatic harmony of gulping cries, and after the crescendo wail, sound track to her own orgasm, she slept: to dream of flesh like iron, of rising whole, and drenched, and shiny-bright; shock-heavy with a pleasure poisonously rare. Woke just in time to see that she'd slept through the clock. Again.

In the hallway, pausing — already late, so what if she was later? — before the door next door. Identical in nondescription to every other down the grimy hall, there was no way to tell by looking just what kind of fun went on there every night. Lurleen, tapping ignition key to lips, thoughtful sideways stare. Imagining, all the reluctant way to work, what sort of exotica, what moist brutalities were practiced there, what kinds of kinks indulged. Wriggling a little, skirt riding up and the cracked vinyl edges of the too-hot seat pressing voluptuously sharp into the damp flesh of her thighs.

It came to her that she had never really seen that next-door neighbor of hers. Maybe they'd bumped into each other, exchanged laundry-room hellos, but for the life of her, Lurleen could not recall. She wasn't even sure if it was just one person or a couple. They sure were a couple at night, though, weren't they just?

The day spent avoiding Roger's gaze, colder than the store and just as constant, more than one smart remark about time clocks. Stopping for cigarettes, she picked up a six-pack, too, clandestine sips at red lights, rehearsing queenly answers she would never give. It was so hot it felt good, brought a warm, slow trickle of sweat down the plane of her temple, the hotter spot between her breasts.

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She was going out tonight, that was for sure; she owed herself something for the just-past bitch of a day. Walking up the hot two flights, a thought nudged her, firm and brisk to get past the beer. She leaned to sight up the stairwell, heart a trifle nervous, quick and jangly in her chest. Well. No time like the present, was there, to scratch a little itch? I'll just say hi, she thought, walking quicker now. I'll say, Hi, I'm your next-door neighbor. I just stopped by to say hello.

Fourth can in hand, smart tattoo on the door before she could change her mind. Wondering who would open, what they would look like. What they would smell like — Lurleen was a great believer in smells. If they would ask her in, and what she might say, knowing she would say yes, and a smile past the thick spot in her throat, and she smiled at that, too; it wasn't that big a deal, was it?

Maybe it was.

Nothing. Silence inside, so she knocked again, louder, humming to herself and, oh boy, here we go: winded swing of the door and "Hi," before it was all the way open. "Hi, I'm Lurleen, your neighbor?"

Tall, her first thought. And skinny. Not model-skinny, just chicken bones, short blonde hair, Giants T-shirt over a flat chest. Anne, she said her name was, and past her curved shoulders, Lurleen could see a flat as cramped and dingy as her own, a little emptier, maybe, a little less ripe, but nothing special. Purely ordinary. Like Anne herself: no exotic bruising, no secret sheen. Just stood there in the doorway playing with the end of her baggy T-shirt, flipping it as she talked, and that thin-lipped smile that said, Are you ready to leave yet? Just one big disappointment, but Lurleen didn't show it, kept up her own smile through the strain of the stillborn chatter until she was back inside her own place, sucking up the last of her beer.

"Well," through a closed-mouth, ladylike burp. "*Well.*"

How could someone so dull have such a wild sex life? Be better off meeting the boyfriend; he had to be the real show. Fucking angel. Lurleen's giggles lasted through the rest of the beer, her long, cool shower, and half hour's worth of mousse and primp. When she left for the bar, Anne's flat was silent still, not even the requisite TV drone. From the parking lot, the lifeless drift of her curtains, beige to Lurleen's red, was all there was to see.

At the bar she met a couple of guys, nice ones — she couldn't quite remember which was Jeff and which was Tony, but they kept her dancing, and drinking, and that was nice, too. After last call she swiveled off her

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seat, sweet, and smiled and said she was sorry, but she had an hour to make the airport to pick up her husband — and even as she said it, she had to wonder why; it was one of them she'd planned on picking up, and never mind that she couldn't remember who was who; names didn't exactly matter at that time of night; words didn't matter past Who's got the rubber. But still she left alone.

Coming home, off-center slew into her parking space, radio up way too loud, singing and her voice a bray in the cut-engine quiet; she almost slipped going up the stairs. Shushing herself as she poured a glass of milk, her invariable after-binge cure-all. Lifting the glass, she caught from the damp skin of her forearm an after-shave scent, mixed with the male smell of Tony. Jeff? It didn't matter, such a pretty boy.

But not as pretty as the boy next door.

And, her thought seeming eerily a signal, she heard the preliminary noises, shifting warm through the wall as if they stroked her: Anne's breathy, wordless voice, that rush of sound, half-sinister whirlwind pavane. Pressed against the wall itself, her bare-skinned sweat a warm adhesive, Lurleen stood, mouth open and eyes shut, working her thin imagination as Anne, presumably, worked her thin body, both — all three — ending in vortex, whirlpool, mouthing that dwindling symphony of screams, Lurleen herself louder than she'd ever been, with any man. Loud enough that they could, maybe, hear her through the walls.

Slumped, damp, she could not quite admit it, say to herself, You want them to hear you. You want *him* to hear you, whoever he is. You want what Anne's getting, better than any bar pickup, better than anything you ever had. Glamorous and dirty. And scary. And hot.

By the next night, she was ready, had turned her bed to lengthwise face the wall: willing herself, forcing herself like an unseen deliberate splinter in their shared and coupling flesh; she *would* be part of this. She had never had anything like what went on over there, never anything good. She would have this if she had to knock down the wall to get it. Fingers splayed against her flesh, heels digging hard into the sheets and letting go, crying out, Hear me. Hear me.

Exhausted at work, but on time, she couldn't take any of Roger's bitching now, not when she had to think. Make a plan. Anne, she was a sorry-looking bitch, no competition once the boyfriend got a good look at Lurleen. The trick was to get him to look. To see. See what he'd been

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hearing, night after night. Of course, it wouldn't be all that easy: if Anne had any brains at all, she would want to keep her boyfriend and Lurleen far, far apart. Lurleen decided she would have to take it slow and smart, *be* smart — not exactly her strong point, but she could be slick; she knew what she wanted.

She began to stalk Anne, never thinking of it in so many words, but as sure and surely cautious as any predator. Waiting, lingering in the hallway after work, for Anne to come home from whatever unfathomable job she did all day. Never stopping to talk, just a smile, pleasant make-believe. She made it her business to do her laundry when Anne did hers; at the first whoosh and stagger of the old machine, Lurleen was there, quarters in hand; her clothes had never been so clean; she had to see. Any jockey shorts, bikini underwear, jockstraps, what? She meant to take one if she could, steal it before, before it was clean. Smell it. You can tell a lot about a man. Lurleen believed, from the smell of his skin, not his after-shave or whatever, but the pure smell of his body. Until his body was beneath hers, it was the best she could do. She pawed through the laundry basket, poked around in the washer: nothing. Just Anne's Priss-Miss blouses, baggy slacks, cheap bras — and just about everything beige. Balked angry toss of the clothing, stepped on it to push it back into the basket. Maybe he liked Anne *because* she was so beige, so . . . nothing? *Could* a man want a woman to be nothing? Just a space to fill? Lurleen had known plenty of guys who liked their women dumb — it made them feel better — but anyway, Anne didn't seem dumb. Just empty.

And still, night after night the same, bed against the wall, Lurleen could be determined; Lurleen could work for what she wanted. Drained every morning, the sting of tender skin in the shower, even Roger noticed her red eyes.

"Not moonlighting, are you?" But she saw he knew it was no question, half-gaze through those tired eyes, and she even, for a moment, considered telling him, considered saying, I want the boy next door, Roger; I want him real bad. I want him so much I even jerk off so he can hear me, so he can know how he turns me on. I want him so much I don't know what to do.

She wasn't getting anywhere. Drumming slow one finger against the order counter, staring right past some guy bumbling on about some opera or something, she wasn't getting *anywhere*, and it was wearing her out. No time for anything else, bars, guys, whatever; there wasn't any other guy

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she wanted. Anne's smiles growing smaller, tighter, her gaze more pinched; was she catching on? Tired from sitting in the hallway — once or twice another neighbor had caught her at it, loitering tense and unseeing until the tap-tap-tap on her shoulder. Hey, are you O.K.? "Fine." Harsh involuntary blush. "Just looking for an earring." Right. Tired from staking out the parking lot, hot breeze through the window; she didn't even know what kind of car he drove. Tired to death and still no glimpse of him, proud author of the sounds; it was killing her to listen, but she couldn't stop. She didn't want to stop.

And then that night, mid-jerk, mid-groan, they stopped. The sounds. Ceased completely, but not to complete silence: a waiting sound, a whisper. Whispering through the walls, such a willing sound.

She yanked on a T-shirt, ends tickling her bare ass as she ran, hit on the door with small, quick fists. "Anne? Are you O.K.?" Never thinking how stupid she might look if the door opened, never considered what excuse she might give. I didn't hear anything, so I thought you might be in trouble. Right. So what. Bang bang on the door.

"Anne?"

The whisper, against the door itself. Hearing it, Lurleen shivered, convulsive twitch like a tic of the flesh, all down her body, and she pressed against the door, listening with all her might. "Anne." But quietly, feeling the heat from her body, the windy rush of her heart. Waiting. "Anne." More quietly still, less than a murmuring breath. "Let me in."

Abruptly, spooking her back a step: the sounds, *hot* intensity trebled, but wrong somehow, guttural, staggering where they should flow, a smell almost like garbage, but she didn't care; once the first scare had passed, she pressed harder into the door, as if by pure want she could break it down; she would get in, she would. T-shirt stuck, sweating like she'd run a mile. I'm sick of just listening. The hall was so hot. Sweat on her forehead, running into her eyes like leaking tears. The doorknob in her slick fingers.

It turned. Simple as that.

In the end, so quick and easy, and it seemed almost that she could not breathe, could not get enough air to move — but she moved, all right, oh yes, stepped right inside into the semidarkness, a fake hurricane lamp broken beside the bed, but there was light enough, enough to see by.

Like angels in love, mating in the cold, graceful rapture of thin air. Hovering above the bed, at least a yard or maybe more — no wonder she

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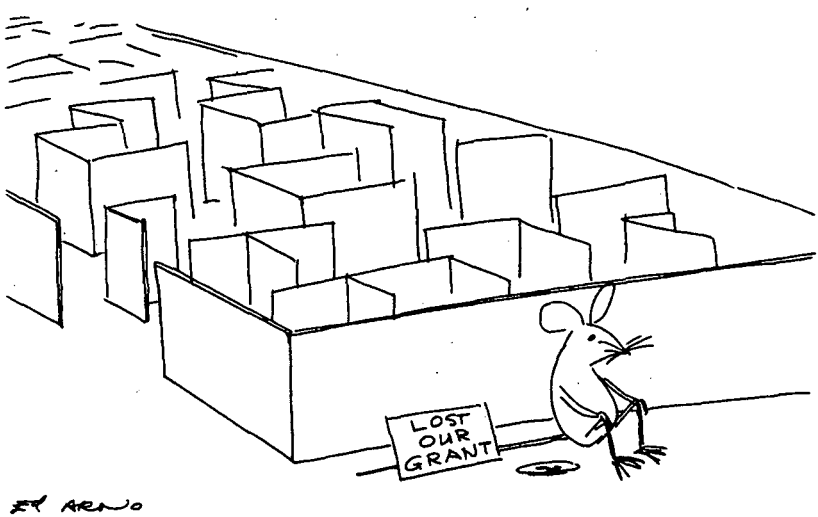
never heard springs—instead the groaned complaint of the walls itself as his thrusting brushed them, on his back the enormous strange construction that kept them airborne, as careless as if it had grown there amongst the pebbled bumps and tiny iridescent fins. His body beautiful, and huge, not like a man's, but so real it seemed to suck up all the space in the room, big elementary muscles, and he was using them all. Anne, bent like a coathanger—it hurt to see the angle of her back—her eyes wide and empty and some stuff coming out of her mouth like spoiled black jelly, but it was too late, Lurleen had sent the door swinging backward to close with a final catch, and in its sound his gaze swiveling to touch hers: the cold regard of a nova, the summoning glance of a star.

Her mouth as open as Anne's as she approached the vast brutality of his embrace, room enough for two there, oh my, yes. Fierce, relentless encroachment promising no pleasure but the pleasure of pain. Not an angel, never had been. Or maybe once, long, a long, long time ago.



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We round out the issue with new writer Sally Caves' first published short story. She has written a number of articles on Early English and Celtic literature and her teleplay, "Hollow Pursuits," aired on Star Trek: The Next Generation. *"Fetch Felix" brings us back to the place in which we began, a look at the way a move in one woman's life brings about the possibility for greater — and sometimes more devastating — changes.*

FETCH FELIX

By Sally Caves

I was angry with my friend.
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe.
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

— *Songs of Innocence and Experience*
William Blake

1: *The Doll and the Dentist*

THERE IS ALMOST NOTHing more threatening to me than moving, and to rent month-to-month is to live in a constant state of peril.

I live, actually, under an inherited burden of things: as small as an heirloom topaz, as large as my father's grand piano. As fragile as my antique Chinese punch bowl bequeathed to me by my great-grandmother

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with her deathbed directive not to break it. My late mother's paintings in their mauve and ocher washes. My aunt's beveled antique mirror, so many decades refracted in its angled glass. My diaries of some seventeen years, their pages thumbed soft. Dana's autographed books. All my letters from Daniel.

Renting month-to-month makes me feel as though the very foundations that support my identity are on the point of crumbling from under me and my things, which in their own strange way menace me with their parapsychotic powers of movement. So when the landlady announced that she was selling the house and I had to get out, the machinery roared into high gear: I had nightmares of earthquakes. I suffered bouts of tachycardia. I found myself holding my breath in front of the television. I returned to the chemical comforts of the Witch.

Worst of all, the silverware began to shake in the kitchen again, after a three-year remission. This — the Warlock — is what I take the Witch to control.

You wouldn't think that a thirty-three-year-old woman could lie on the floor and weep over a lost deal on an apartment, as though a lover had gone out of her life. That's what I did. I'd spent a hellish week looking for another place, and found a splendid penthouse in the clouds. It had a wood parquet floor; it had a balcony with tomato plants, a skylight, and a LEASE. A foundation of written words. And all for nine hundred a month. It was available August 15, but I was supposed to be out of my place by the first.

"I really like you," the landlord of the new place had said. "There's a man coming by this afternoon to look at it, but I'd almost rather give it to you now."

I was apprehensive with hope. "I need to check with my landlady. She might charge me a month's rent if I'm not out August 1."

"O.K., give me a call."

I raced home and left a message on my landlady's answering machine. I called her the "Doll" in private, and now I regretted every secret meanness that filled me up like phlegm. She didn't call all afternoon, and I paced around and tore at my chewed-up thumbs. Finally, after six that evening, I drove over to her house and caught her taking the pink plastic bags from J.C. Penney out of her car. I wondered how she kept from ripping them with her heavy, long, fake, dark-red fingernails.

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After much deliberation and lighting of cigarettes, she told me she didn't seem to think there would be a problem so long as I paid her one-thirtieth of the monthly rent for every day that I was to remain in my apartment. I thanked her obsequiously, and by seven, the summer sun vanishing into the bowels of the city, I called the man with the loft.

"I rented it," he said. "I couldn't refuse the guy. He had first and last month's rent in cash."

An apartment, an inanimate object, had slipped out of my grasp as effortlessly as if it had been a salmon in a stream. A man had reeled in my salmon on the strength of his first and last month's rent. A *man* had bested me with money, and the Doll had scratched me to the core. I cried for hours.

"Well, next time give him a deposit," was all that Madeline, my cold-blooded sister, could say over the phone. "You overreact to everything. Why don't you calm down?"

Calm down? My scalp bunched up under my hair independent of my wishes; a little gnome pounded a nail into my temple, and I couldn't drive him out. Worst of all, sometimes my eyeballs would roll rhythmically to the right, and the rooms would spin, and no matter how much I retched and clutched at the furniture, I couldn't stop their movement. These intervals were marginally helped by the Witch, and I hadn't had an attack of vertigo in two years. But my work was crumbling out from under me like rotten floorboards — and money, as everyone knows, helps hold the walls together. In a dizzy, nauseous haze, I popped the Witch, point five milligrams, and went to my restless bed, its sheets an ocean of hurricanes. The hunt for a foundation was to begin all over again. I had no house, no commissions, and no lover.

It was in the wee hours of the morning that, muzzy with sleep, I heard the antique Chinese punch bowl — "screee! screeee!" — as it crept across the wood of the china cabinet like a stealthy animal.

He had slicked-back hair and blue eyes that wouldn't look at mine, made large and childish by his horn-rimmed glasses. Receding hairline, graying Charlie Chaplin mustache, and a very good tan. The kind of tan you work at, offset by a starchy white Lacoste shirt. His brown hairy knees stuck out of holes in his faded blue jeans. Our feet pressed the tiles above my future home below with its track lights. Not as nice as the

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loft, but it had a fireplace and a beautiful deck.

Our feet, I thought, could not be more different, as I looked at them through the glass surface: his bare, hairy insteps; my Italian leather high heels that sharpened the toes to points. I wondered what he saw when he looked at me, if he did, for he kept his gaze somewhere at the level of my chin. I had dressed for apartment hunting: my shoulder-length red hair was washed and combed to a lustrous sheen; I wore a long taupe skirt and black sleeveless blouse chosen expressly to set off its fiery hue: my one beauty. I could just see myself, distorted and transparent, in the slight arc of his lenses. Together, coordinated, elegant even, despite my looming, unfeminine height, my great German hands with their bitten nails. The Lease, that luminous document, lay between us on the table.

"Don't you want to go home and think about it for a while?" he had asked, amazed at my alacrity.

Already he didn't like me. He didn't want me as a tenant. He had the overly rounded syllables of the natives in this area of American.

"I've learned from experience," I said in my low, cultivated voice, "that one must strike while the iron is hot."

He laughed nervously.

"What does that mean?"

Definitely not a reader.

"It means that if you see an apartment you like, you don't wait for someone else to snatch it out from under you."

He wanted to know what I did. To make sure I could pay the rent.

"I used to be an English teacher," I said. "Now I'm a literary agent. More lucrative."

"What's a literary agent?"

"A representative for writers who are trying to sell their work to publishers and film producers."

"Sounds kinda like a go-between."

"It is. I go between here and Manhattan."

He chuckled humorlessly. I put him between forty and forty-five by the grizzly chest hairs that poked out at the top of his shirt.

"English teacher," he said, showing the tiresome nervosity that we English Teachers have to deal with at every cocktail party — as though he expected me to correct his grammar. "English was my worst subject in school."

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"Relax. I'm only renting your apartment. not reading it. Do you want me for a tenant?"

"Well, sure."

I signed the lease. He countersigned. It was for six months.

"No pets," he said, "and no water beds."

"What do *you* do?" I asked him.

"I'm a dentist." He laughed placatingly.

I had an image of him in a white smock and a scraping hook.

"Well, we're even," I said. "I hate the dentist."

His name: Dick Pritchard. I saw his signature. Unshortened, he was Dr. Richard Pritchard. A common feature of Welsh names was reduplication: John Jones, Evan Evans; Tom Thomas, William Williams, all of them squared.

"A Welsh name."

"English," he said defensively, as though I'd accused him of wearing dentures.

2: *Holophobia*

A WEEK LATER, renter's remorse set in.

Despite its many beauties, the new apartment exhibited a number of flaws now that it didn't have any furniture in it. The insulation had leaked out between the inner glass and the permanent storm of my living room window. It looked like a bizarre orange foam-rubber fungus, and there was no way to reach it from either side; the window was painted shut. The hardwood floors were a wreck. There was a big stain the middle of the living room, made, no doubt, from some big dog's urine that had seeped into the wood.

"I don't do floors," said Dick Pritchard, secure in his position behind the signed lease. "Sanding three rooms would cost a fortune."

I pointed to the chips in the plaster where pictures had hung.

"Those need to be spackled and the walls painted over. I'll paint the whole place for you if you'll pay for the paint."

"I'll pay for half the paint," said Dick after a draw on his cigarette. "I think that's fair."

"You realize," I said, and smiled my sweetest smile (I have lovely teeth and have been praised by many oral hygienists), "that if I sand your floors

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and paint your walls, I'll be helping you make home improvements. Don't you think you could help me with something that's of obvious benefit to you?"

"You're living here now." He grinned nervously. "And that's a benefit to *you*." There were steel fangs under that nervousness. Under those shy, creepy spectacles.

I bought a dhurrie rug. I painted the walls eggshell — Glidden on sale for $150; my half of the bargain. For three weeks the apartment was a factory, busy metamorphosing from a dismembered animal into House Beautiful. I slept amid paint fumes. My head reeled. Every noise seemed to pierce my heart with a needle. I would start suddenly and sweatily out of a deep sleep, and had to resort to higher dosages of the Witch at night.

And I didn't like living in this house with this strange, hostile medicine man. Nor did my Warlock, which protested in subtle, vicious ways.

When he wouldn't let me put up my Olympia wind chimes, a gift to me from Daniel, my weirdness began to happen again.

"You put a hole in the wood, and the wasps will make nests in it," said Dick.

"But the nail will be in it."

"Just don't put another hole in the porch, O.K.?"

So a tile fell out of the bathroom wall, just like that, revealing a hole the size of a small bead. I spackled it and fit the tile back into its damaged place.

I wasn't allowed to move the cable for my TV.

"If every tenant put in a new hole in a different place for the cable," said Dick, with his odious titter, "pretty soon the whole floor'll cave in."

"That's a bit of an exaggeration, don't you think?"

"I don't want another hole. Can't you respect that?"

At night the floors came alive with creaking and groaning, and I found a knothole in the floorboards of my bedroom over which I spread a smaller dhurrie rug.

I had moved my vulnerable psyche and all its material extensions into a house with a landlord who had a phobia about holes. That's why he had become a dentist: so he could fill them compulsively.

Holophobia. A fear of Wholeness.

He wouldn't let me put up a bird feeder, either. "It attracts mice," he told me.

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"It says on the carton that it's supposed to attract birds."

"Very funny."

That evening a cardinal feather drifted down from the ceiling above my grand piano and settled across the yellowed keys. Blood-red against ivory.

I stood on the sidewalk and peered at the house: a respectable-looking duplex of red brick and white columns in a respectable Long Island neighborhood. Examining it from the outside like this, no one could tell how many holes were on the inside. The feather had put me on edge. I came across the word "warlock" in an article I was reading in bed, and immediately I heard my dieffenbachia — my bitter, uncontrollable dumb cane — fall off its plant stand in the living room with a terrible crash, as if pushed by invisible fingers.

My new neighbor came over and introduced herself. She was a tiny woman with a great cloud of black hair that dwarfed her elfin features. She wore a faded sixties shift and beach walkers. Braless, her breasts were heavy and swaying under the cotton shift, inconsonant with her stature.

"My name's Andrea," she announced. "Are you new?"

Her cat had followed her out, a handsome red tabby, and I bent to stroke him. I told her I was a literary agent.

"I used to write quite a lot," said Andrea, poking her toe at an enormous mushroom that grew on the dark side of a maple tree. "Now I'm into healing."

"A doctor?"

"No, my brother's the doctor of the family. I do white magic."

I flinched. I don't like dilettantes who dabble in the occult. Since childhood, the occult was too close for comfort.

"Do you want a cat?" said Andrea.

"This isn't your cat?"

"He's been hanging around for three days. I think he's been abandoned."

"My landlord specified no cats."

"Dick's afraid of cats."

A promising Achilles' heel. I let the cat come in my apartment, and fed it some half-and-half, which it fell upon ravenously. Not a pet, a guest. This got to be a routine, and to my delight and dismay, as I got out of my car at dusk, the cat would greet me, purring like a little robot and

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twining its soft orange body around my ankles.

I put down a bowl of food in the garage for it, hidden from the inspecting eyes of my landlord.

At night as I painted the baseboards, listening to Vivaldi on my stereo, I could hear the Holophobe pacing around overhead, his great mammoth footsteps jarring the Chinese punch bowl where it perched on the cabinet under a drop cloth. He wouldn't even clean the chimney. I had showed him its sooty depths with a flashlight, quipping about its resemblance to a mouth. "Think of it as plaque," I had said. Great crispate flakes of black paper peeled away from the creosote and fluttered like moth wings in the air of our disturbance. He told me cleaning the chimney was my responsibility: "Get it done professionally. I bet it costs you more to tune your piano."

I said if I didn't tune my piano for two years, I wasn't in danger of burning the house down.

He told me he didn't want me playing it after ten o'clock. We were really hitting it off. I lived in the house of a man who resented my presence, for whom I and my things were an invasion.

The worst manifestation of this resentment — which was to set in motion a number of disturbing events that led up to my unsettling encounter with Fetch Felix — scared me because I thought it was the Warlock at work.

Now, this is not to say that I blame Dick entirely. He must have known on some kind of level (people are far more perceptive than we give them credit for being — even stupid people) that I was calling him Prick Dickhard behind his back. Otherwise, why would he have done the asinine thing that he did?

I came home one night, three weeks after having moved in, only to find the little white Christmas lights with which I had festooned my kitchen window laid out in rows on my living room floor. I felt flung back for an instant in terror. I was suddenly fourteen, alone for a weekend in my parents' beach house in Charleston, trailing sand and salt water across the polished floorboards. I had come into my little white bedroom done up in ivory chintz and matching curtains by my doting father: there, laid out across the white bed in neat rows, was all my dirty underwear I had thrown in the hamper a week ago.

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This event was followed by a chain of other Warlock attacks: the moving Vicks VapoRub, the books that fell off the bookshelf, and other events that won me the suspicion and concern of my entire family twenty years ago.

I got a grip and looked closely. There was a note attached to the lights on the floor. With quivering hands, I picked it up:

> *Valeria. You have decorated the inside of your new home in your taste. I reserve the right to decorate the outside of my home in mine. I don't want Xmas lights in my windows. Their [sic] dangerous, and more appropriate at the Yule Tide. So I have exorcised [sic] my right as a landlord to take them down.*

"The Prick," I murmured. I returned his letter with my red-penciled corrections: *Aye, aye, Captain. But no English teacher would take you seriously.*

That ought to hit a nerve.

The summer unfolded in all of its unpleasant details: the itching noise of cicadas, the hiss that grows in one tree and subsides, like tinnitus, answered by another down the block. Your flesh sticks to you: thigh against thigh — the damp place behind the knee. Nothing dries; your washcloths have that sour smell of mold — as well as your socks, your underwear, your skin — mingled with the sweet pungency of moist paint.

Oblivious to my murderous thoughts, Dick trotted cheerily in and out of the house, flinging himself into his Jaguar and roaring away on outings with his girlfriend, a thin, long-haired woman in her late thirties with a sullen Cover Girl face. I summarized his letter to Linda Markowitz, Best-selling Author and my one woman friend in this city.

"He's not supposed to enter your premises unless he gives you prior notice," Linda told me. "Go down to the Housing Council and get a brochure. You're protected by the law from violation of the 'New York State Doctrine of the Tenant's Right to Quiet Enjoyment.'"

"Too late now," I said. "The moment's past."

Quiet Enjoyment: a curious phrase.

Mindful of unquiet enjoyment, I described to Linda how at midnight, Dick and Cover Girl would thump around, dropping shoes and other objects overhead. I'd be subjected to the peacock cries of her pleasure, and

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just when I'd thought they'd drifted off to sleep, she'd cough, laugh, and her hard heels would hit the floorboards. Then it would be the shower and the going-home routine.

It's almost impossible to tell a reader who doesn't suffer from obsessive-compulsive behavior about the overwhelming significance I gave to the inconveniences that every tenant must endure. The apartment inspired irrational and violent feelings in me. It didn't fit me, and my things moved out in protest like a cramped child stretching in a crib too small for him.

Case in point: there was no ventilator in the bathroom. When I complained of this to the landlord, he said, "Open the window." "The window can't be opened," I said. "It's wired shut on the outside." He came and inspected it and said that that was for security. Well, certainly he would fix it so that the window could be opened a little ways? Well, it was a casement window. Couldn't he make it a window with a sash? Well, would I be willing to pay for it?

It always came down to that.

"The reason I keep it wired shut," he said, "is for security purposes. Which do you want? Ventilation or security?"

"Both. I want to let the steam out. This is your responsibility."

He would see about it, he said. He didn't. A week went by, and another week, and mold began to grow on the ceiling above the shower. I had images of braces wired together, locking mute jaws. One night as I lay in bed, my eyes wide with insomnia, the bathroom door flew open with a bang, and my heart nearly burst under my breastbone. The sour, moldy smell of washcloths filled the room. I got up and slammed the door so hard the foundations shook, and in the morning the sour washcloth was on my bed, having soaked through the blanket. A detail I was powerless to tell anyone.

Rage seethed hot inside me.

Rage was not good for work. It was distracting, and I held it off like a lion tamer. Louis Myers, my partner in Maynard and Myers Literary Agency, was piling me high with things to read, most of which I gave to Melissa Panasitti and Bill Frost, my assistants. Melissa would send some of them back to me with a scrawled note: "Should we give this one a try, Valeria?" I'd read it and see only my rage.

In the office I managed to keep my anger below eye level. I was brought up in a good Methodist family, and my method was to play the woman in

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control. At work I was professional, slick, chic, and impenetrably polite to our clientele. Louis Myers was with me because I had learned to joke with men. Dodge their blunt barbs, fling them back in their faces in ways that were witty and subtle. Show any signs of weakness, and you're a goner. I hated the Dick because my weaknesses, quite against my will, were spread out wide and vulnerable under his heavy apartment.

"What's really rich," said Linda Markowitz during one of our few lunches together, "is the fact that not only will she not spend the night with him, but she has to wash him off before she goes home."

I liked Linda because she played at being crazy the way I played at being in control. Her appearance was studiedly out of control: immense platinum earrings that dangled like mobiles from her ears: her hair short and spiky, her eyes baggy and red. She wore long tunics of bronze or bright metallic blue, and she wrote feminist books with lots of photographs. On the outside she was the madwoman in the attic, but I knew that inside she was as sound as brass.

"I'll bet she's married," Linda said. "And not to him. Does she have her own car?"

"A BMW. Dickyboy has to run out, take his Jaguar out of the garage, put her car in there, and close the door. At 11 P.M."

"She's obviously married. I wonder who she is."

"She could be Queen Elizabeth," I said, "as long as they keep quiet. Why can't I tell him to wear a muffler after midnight?"

"Because he owns the house."

"I shouldn't have jumped at it like a starving cat."

"Landlords and lovers," said Linda. "If they know you're eager, they treat you like shit."

I fed my stray on the sly. He had taken to crying outside my bedroom window, and, to hide his telltale signs, I started letting him come into my apartment while Dick was away with Cover Girl. This, of course, only increased the cat's midnight calling, and the dilemma intensified. I watched the animal curl up on my couch, lick its stripy paws, and pass them over its ears. I was growing fond of him; no matter the accumulation of yellow hairs on my furniture.

And while he was resident in this unfinished apartment of mine, the disturbing automation of objects called a truce.

An eye in the storm.

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3: *The Burden of Talent*

I THINK IT was about this time, as September was coming to a close, that Fetch Felix first queried us about a screenplay, and that night I dreamed the chimney caught fire, and unquenchable flames burst out in smoldering, beautiful streaks all throughout my apartment.

Synopsis: it was set in modern Iceland about a Norse woman who summons her *fylgja* — the Icelandic word for "fetch," the "apparition of a living person," the author explained — to avenge her dead lover's murderers. Literally meaning "follower," the *fylgja* is the animal totem in Norse sagas that serves to announce the arrival of the nobleman it represents. It is his spiritual doppelgänger; it precedes him into battle or homecoming by revealing itself in a dream to those he will visit. Wolves and bears were the most common form of "fetch" in the ancient literature, although otters could serve, too, and ravens. The woman had invented her lover, however, as well as the crime she thought had killed him. But the fetch was very real. It was a she-wolf that she coaxed into form out of twigs and dry leaves, and it stalked the dreams of her imagined enemies.

"This has a certain Bergmanesque charm," I wrote across the bottom of the synopsis. "But it needs more development and commercial appeal. Send me the first ten pages anyway." I flipped back to stare at the name on the query letter, and then returned to my written comment.

"'Fetch Felix,' I added in my large script. "Is that a pseudonym? If so, it has a certain redundancy you might wish to avoid."

But no, Fetch Felix was to be reached at his address in Manhattan, Kansas. And there was his telephone number.

It was amazing how many unpublished writers of ambition and persistence filled our teeming nation. We were up to our teeth in bad scripts and first books. Lots of horror: lots of machinery sprouting guts, tentacles entering orifices — pseudo-Cronenberg. Lots of blah mainstream. I felt sorry for the young ones, the callow twenty-year-olds whose voices shook over the telephone:

"Hi. I'm Josh Olsen. You might not remember me, but — I sent in that script for *Friday the Thirteenth the Series*. Yeah. Nine weeks ago. Well, it was about. . . ."

Looking through the bulk of their dot matrix and misspellings was like sifting sand for pearls. We were the dream-makers. If we were good, and

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they were good, we could take their fantasies and put them before the public in living color with a phone call here, a well-placed word there. But there were too many people, too many voices, too many visions calling out for recognition and remuneration. Too much psychotic fantasy that made me restless at night.

Too little real talent.

Recently, and this was a blow, we had lost one of our more prolific and successful writers, Dana Rottblatt; we weren't making the connections he wanted fast enough, and he got another agent. This had disturbed me considerably; I had always nursed a secret admiration for Dana. We had even flirted mildly. A couple dinners over wine. He reminded me of Daniel, my ex: both of them had that smoldering Jewish beauty, youthfulness, and freedom that I, the self-made shiksa, envied and longed for. When Dana left us, it was another tearful call to my sister for me. I couldn't even tell her what was bothering me. We were overworked, underpaid, and slipping further behind, I said. We had discussed the possibilities of charging reader's fees for first-time scripts and novels. Always a sign of financial danger.

"Quit buying so many things," said my unimaginative sister.

Madeline Maynard Armstrong. She was a nurse in Florida, married to a pediatrician.

To be an agent, to be a go-between, is to be a writer manqué, I told myself morosely as I sat cross-legged on my futon bed, crumpled pages in hand. Over the weeks the apartment had become civilized. My terra-cotta tomb dogs held my books in place in the living room, my aunt's beveled antique mirror was over the fireplace, and my bedroom had finally lost that penetrating smell of latex.

Meanwhile, the manuscripts piled up high on my desk at work.

I was reading a tortured plot about a man who goes into the future and kills himself, then has to wait fifteen years to meet himself and act in self-defense. Except that if he kills his past self, he would kill himself, but if he *doesn't* kill his past self . . . ecchh. The author couldn't even spell Manhattan. She spelled it with an *e*. Manhatten. And here I was slipping into another rage over a mediocre book.

REJECT! After only five pages.

Except I knew I could write a better novel than this one using the same premise. I had a better vision of it, but to make something of that vision

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on my own could get me into trouble. As an agent, you were always being tempted by your clientele. Your job was to fetch the talent from outside. Not foster it in yourself.

I worked and slept under a demanding burden of talent, none of it my own. I hoped fervently that Felix's script was superb, so that I could market it and not be tempted.

I put down the manuscript and switched off the light. Tomorrow at 8:30 I had to meet with the bitch from Oriole Books. My fingers tapped the baseboard of my bed in a high-strung staccato. My neck was stiff. Should I get up and get an aspirin for my headache? Too tired. I pressed the pain into the pillow, drifted on the edge of blessed sleep.

She laughed upstairs, a loud, raucous chuckle, and slumber was frightened clean away. Pricky Dicky answered her with a rumble of words. She laughed again, and my heart pounded with fury. I looked at the illuminated dial of my clock radio: 1:57. Sleep had blanketed me for forty minutes, but its fragile alpha rhythms could not screen out my landlord. They were having a goddamn conversation up there, in voices loud enough for a cocktail party.

The urge rose in me to jump shrieking out of my bed in the direction of the ceiling. "SHUT UUUUUUP!! YOU ASSHOLES!!!!!" But I controlled it, as I always did. Visions came to me: I was shooting them with a machine gun. I microwaved them through the ceiling. I ran out and demolished his Jaguar. I put a spell on him that kept him farting for weeks. I wiped his mouth away with a magic wand. I opened holes in his walls and filled them with terrible teeth.

They kept on laughing. It was as if they were tuned to a special nerve in my body that vibrated with anger and agony, and I was making it available to them. I was the anguished Dustin Hoffman in *Marathon Man*, and the Dentist had me right where he wanted me, under his signature on the lease and my fear of having to move again. I didn't get to sleep till four.

At 6:30 in the morning, I heard the heartrending cry of Fetch Felix, as I had fondly named him, outside my bedroom window. Wearily, I got up to let him in so that the landlord wouldn't hear him. Bad news. Dick was creaking down the red-carpeted stairs of the foyer, dressed for an attack upon the cavities of his patients, while I, clutching my bathrobe, admitted the culprit through the front door. In flagrante delicto.

Dick froze.

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"Don't let that cat in here," he said.

"He's a stray. I'm looking for a home for him," I lied.

"I'll have him taken to the pound."

"I'll take care of it, Dr. Pritchard," I said. "But you know, having a cat on the premises will help your mice problem."

"I don't have a mice problem."

Nothing to do but look for a home for Felix. Andrea said she couldn't control the cat unless she kept him in all the time. He'd be at the window every night. No one at the agency wanted an unneutered cat. I advertised in the papers; a little boy called up.

I took Felix in my car and delivered him eight blocks away into the arms of his new servant. I got in the car and drove off quickly so that I wouldn't have to see him struggling and keening in the strange boy's grasp.

Andrea was in her homeopathic herb garden, pulling up weeds.

"You know Dick?" I asked her.

"Yeah. He's been here for six years."

"Did he ever have a tenant before?"

"He used to rent to his brother and sister-in-law, but his brother moved out."

"How come?"

"A long, sad story."

"Tell me. It might explain his incredible hostility toward me."

"Can you keep it confidential?"

"My lips are sealed."

"The woman he's seeing is his brother's ex-wife."

"You mean his sister-in-law?"

"Ex. She left her husband for him."

"That's not incest, is it?"

"Not today."

"How do you know this?"

"Their auras."

My shields went up instantly.

"Come on, Andrea."

She smiled, pixieish. "No, his brother told me."

I relaxed. "Am I right in thinking, however, that he's a real sonofabitch?"

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"Oh, probably. He's full of fury." She pulled up a weed with immense, pallid roots like withered legs.

"Just as you are."

I folded my arms; a defensive gesture. "Is that what you see in my aura?"

"That and a cat."

"Not anymore."

I went in. She unnerved me.

So he was sleeping with his ex-sister-in-law, I mused, while I chopped up tomatoes with controlled violence. Amazing. The ex-sister-in-law acquired a shining patina of fascination. There was a stamped letter sticking out of his mailbox the next morning, waiting for the mailman. Stealthily, I bent it up to read the address: Susie Pritchard. Could be his mother. Or his sister. It was in a pink envelope: I knew it was his sister-in-law. Ex. And she had his name, too. "Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy sister." Creepy!

Creepier was the fact that she used to live in this very apartment with the maligned and cuckolded brother.

Their lovemaking began to disturb me more and more. It echoed in the walls, and Sunday night, as I lay there listening to it and thinking of Lot, something struck my window with the violence of the Warlock. I heard a moan like a woman in labor.

I leaped out of bed, quaking, and pulled the blinds.

There, in the light of the halogen lamp that kept my bedroom unpleasantly bright, clinging by his claws to my screen, was the silhouette of Fetch Felix, limbs extended like a great fruit bat. He moaned again in reproach for my treachery, and fell to the ground.

I dashed outside in my nightgown. The sash grated open overhead, and Dick stuck his rumpled head out.

"I thought you were going to get rid of that damn cat."

Dick, of course, made me pay for the screen, which had been torn away at the top. The next morning, as I walked to my car, I saw him stooping down by my bedroom window and placing something in the grass.

"What's that?" I said.

"Nothing. Just a little deterrent."

I bent to pick it up, and Dick got in his car.

It was a greasy ball of raw ground round steak. I crushed it and found the white powder inside it.

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"Jesus," I said. I entered my garage and found similar balls of meat in Felix's secret dish. I raced around the house; those were the only baits that I could find. I dragged Felix out from under the porch and locked him in my apartment. I was late to work that day and couldn't concentrate on anything.

When I got home, I waited for Dick. Felix had pooped on my dhurrie rug — no wonder, he was frightened and alone for seven hours. I intercepted my landlord in the hallway when I heard him come in.

"You put aspirin in that meat. Do you know what aspirin does to a cat?"

Dick smiled fatuously, his glasses averted. "I suppose I do," he said.

"You goddamn ailurophobe . . . ," I began.

"Don't give me that literary shit," shouted Dick, and swung upstairs. "It says no pets in lease."

"It ought to say no adulterous sisters-in-law."

I was aghast at the sounds that came out of my mouth. There was no way to recall them.

In slow motion, Dick turned his flabby face toward me over the banister.

"Mind your own fucking business," he said.

My own fucking business. How appropriate. I leveled him with a gaze, and he went inside.

On New Year's Day, I would leave this house of bad karma, no matter how much of the Witch I had to swallow to endure it. I went out that evening, gathered Felix in my arms, and drove him thirty miles out of town and abandoned him in a field near a farm. I had to kick at him to keep him from leaping into the car in terror at being left. I pulled away to the tune of his frantic, piercing cries and drove home, blinded by my tears.

Soon after that, not immediately, but soon, my Warlock *really* began to get out of hand.

4: *Unquiet Enjoyment*

THE LEAVES were changing, and the sugar maple outside my living room window was a dazzling pumpkin, almost the color of my hair. I was feeling good today — no headaches, no bouts of insomnia — which was amazing, because work had been gruesome. Louis was in a foul mood, and I had nearly fired Bill for losing a manu-

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script. But overhead, it was pointedly quiet in the evenings, and the Phobe was gone most nights.

At 9:35 P.M. Sunday night, I was playing Debussy: *Passepied*. One of my father's favorites. I was in superb control, and the staccato rhythms of the piece poured out from under my hands. Gradually, I became aware of another sound in the apartment. The doorknob to my apartment door was rattling. It had been rattling for about twenty-five seconds before I registered it.

I stopped playing. A cold sweat broke over me. Rattle rattle rattle, went the door. Ignore it, and it will go away. It didn't.

I got up and faced it. The knob was turning in both directions, exactly as if someone were trying to get in. There was the sound of keys jangling on the other side of the wood that separated my space from the Neutral Zone beyond. The rattling gave over to loud, long knocks. Breaking free from my paralysis, I lunged at the door and slid the chain lock into place.

"Valeria," shouted Dick's voice on the other side of the door. "It's me."

The unexpected, even when it's banal, is always startling. Another false Warlock alarm.

"What do you want?" I said shakily. I opened the door as far as the chain would permit, and stared into Dick's enlarged eyes.

"You play beautifully," he said, staring back into mine for a change. "Even in your raincoat."

I looked down. For four hours I had been wearing my raincoat indoors. I was suddenly overcome with horror at the thought that he was going to attack me for my words of six weeks ago, and my grip tightened on the edge of the door.

"You know, you don't have to act as though I'm a burglar," said Dick, gesturing at the chain. Obviously confident of my fear.

"Don't I? I'm sorry if my locked door was impeding your easy entrance into my apartment," I said, my voice wandering into the treble registers. I had mastered the knack of getting my door open quickly with my key. Fortunately, Dick had not.

Dick rolled his eyes.

"You were playing. I didn't think you heard me."

"What do you want?" I said.

"Did you take my paper?"

"Paper? What paper?"

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"My Sunday *Times*. It wasn't on the porch."

"Maybe they didn't deliver it."

"I called the delivery boy, and he said he had." There was more than a hint of accusation in his voice.

I stared at him through the crack. He was crazy.

"You tried to break into my apartment over a paper?" I said. "You think I took it?"

"I didnt *break* in. . . ."

"You nearly broke your key trying to get in."

"Is that it?"

"What?"

Dick pointed. I turned around.

The open pages of the Sunday *Times* were propped inside the Chinese punch bowl. I'd never seen them before.

I crossed the room, gathered them up, came back to the door, undid the chain, and handed them to Dick.

"I . . . I don't remember bringing them in," I stammered. "I used to get the paper in my old place, knee-jerk reaction. . . ."

"Sure. No problem." Dick took the papers primly and tucked them under his arm. He was clearly enjoying the moment and my faltering control of language. I detested him.

"Oh, and another thing," he said, turning back from the wine-colored stairs that led to his apartment. He put a hand on the door I was trying to close in his face.

"I thought we had agreed that if I'm quiet after midnight, you'd be as well."

"What do you mean?" I said, my heart in my throat.

"Don't play the goddamn piano after midnight. O.K.?"

After he had gone upstairs, I stared into the crimson depths of the foyer for a long while. Something glittered at my foot, and I looked down.

It was a dental instrument, the kind for scraping plaque, its hooked barb as sharp as a needle.

"Madeline," I said into the phone. "You know that Poltergeist phenomenon that plagued me when I was a kid? It's coming back. Ever since Mom and Dad died."

"Oh VaLERia, will you just take my advice and see a doctor?"

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I could feel the tears blistering the edges of my eyes. I didn't want to cry over the phone yet again to Madeline. I told her what had happened.

"It's never crossed over into a stranger's space," I said. "It's always happened to me in my apartment, and now it seems to be widening its field."

"Valeria," said Madeline, after my long silence over the phone. "See a psychologist."

"You mean a parapsychologist."

"I do not. It's nothing supernatural and never was."

"Right, right. Pulled by threads. I've heard that one."

"You're probably somnambulating. It might just be another manifestation of migraine aura or premenstrual tension."

"Yeah, but how does that explain the silverware shaking? Or the punch bowl moving?"

"You might be hallucinating. Haven't you gotten off those tranquilizers yet?"

"I'm not dependent."

"But you take too many of them."

"Can't you come up and see me?"

"I have tons of work to do!! The next six weeks is solid NIC Unit." Madeline's specialty was premature infants. "Why don't you come down here? We can put you up with Ted's parents in Miami."

"*I'm* not busy, of course."

I had picked up the dental instrument and laid it on the stairs. Dick could have dropped it, perhaps.

"I *told* you he wasn't supposed to enter your premises," Linda said when I gave her a version of Dick's "break-in" the next day. "He can't use his key on your door unless he gives you twenty-four hours' *written* notice, or unless it's an emergency. It's called The Right to Quiet Enjoyment. Underline it and put it in his mailbox."

I underlined my Right to Quiet Enjoyment and put it in his box, which hung next to mine. The Dick ignored it. He'd made his parry, and it had touched. Meanwhile, my unspoken anger grew. I rehashed the scene: "You play beautifully. Even in your raincoat." Obviously rehearsed. Had he intended to say that to me when he had let himself into my apartment, stopped only by the unexpected difficulty with the key? "Even in your *X*." An easy program: just fill in the gap. I would be playing, oblivious to

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the sounds of his entrance. There he would stand in my living room and deliver his melodramatic line. "You play beautifully." Stunned silence from me as I whirled around on the piano bench. "Even in your bathrobe." "Nightgown." "Underwear." "Birthday suit."

And all objections on my part would be countered by the evidence of my theft. And my previous insurrection with the cat.

Was I to have risen, stammering and clutching the piano music to my naked body?

"You play beautifully."

I couldn't get it out of my head. It was like a ditty of rage. Even when he left for a week, and I had the house to myself, blissfully free of clomping and scraping and bird sounds overhead, my brain still blistered with angry scenes.

And my things moved as if seeking a way out. I found the dhurrie rug pushed up in a huge fold from the blind, peripatetic lunge of the piano on its way toward the door.

5: *Lot's Daughter*

THE FETCH
by Mitch Felix

Act I

FADE IN:

EXT. HARBOR SECTION OF REYKJAVIK (TWILIGHT)

ANGLE ON

Barnacle-covered piling just above surface of dirty water.

SLOW UPWARD PAN; CLOSE ANGLE ON

gritty surface of pier; flecks of fish remains. Bright metal houses across the way of different colors, lit up by setting sun.

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ANGLE ON

pair of muddy green Wellingtons. A HAND reaches down into a pail of bait; gropes around for a sardine, pulls one out. The hand is roughened and chapped, the nails broken. The OTHER HAND joins it in attaching the bait to a hook: it slips the sharp barb through the eyes and gills of the dismembered sardine.

ANGLE ON FISHERMAN'S FACE

A woman of about forty years. Leathery complexion, flaxen hair pulled back by a bandanna. Brilliant blue eyes gleam through wrinkly slits. This is SIGNY STEFANSDOTTIR fishing for her soul.

CLOSER ANGLE ON BLUE HOUSE IN DISTANCE

A window, blinds drawn. Blinds move, suddenly, as though someone within is looking out.

First act. Already restless, I got up from the couch and crossed over to the piano where I had put my folder of other things to read, when I heard the key turn in the lock of the front door. I jumped a mile. Not a replay?

This had to be Dick coming back early, but I hadn't heard his characteristically heavy tread on the porch. I drew my bathrobe around me and looked out between two slats of my drawn blinds.

As if I could see anything on the dark porch.

"Hello, Valeria," said a feminine voice.

"Linda?" Didn't sound like Linda. It was late: 11:45.

"Did you want to speak to me, Valeria?" The woman's voice was ugly and nasal. "Did you think I was a burglar, Valeria? Or did you think I was going to take your paper?"

I got a distinctly unpleasant feeling in my stomach, as though I'd been socked. Not to be daunted, I hauled up the blinds and opened the window. Cold Halloween weather blew in.

"Susie, I presume. Are you collecting Richard's mail?"

"That wouldn't be any of your business, would it?"

Lot's daughter came and crouched by my open window, and I could

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see her face distinctly. Not quite so Cover Girl. Her dark-dyed hair accentuated her thin features. She wasn't smiling. I leaned heavily over the frame, blocking her entrance. My bathrobe gapped a little. Let it. She was as flat as Manhattan, Kansas.

"Anyone," I breathed, "who comes to my door when I'm here alone at night is my business."

"Yeah," she said. "But do you know that your nose is a bit too big for your face?"

I suddenly felt as huge as the grand piano.

"Your nose," she said in response to my silence. She touched her own surgically corrected one. "It's a little big for your face. If you know what I mean."

"I think you're full of shit, brotherfucker."

I shut the window on her.

I shut the blinds. I wedged a chair against the door. If she spoke to me again, I would rush out and rip at her hair by its dyed roots. I resisted throwing a book against the wall. She would not hear the effect she had on me.

You cunt. You pig's ass. If my nose is too big for my face, your pudenda are too big for this house, and quit sticking them in my apartment.

She would have killed me had I said that. I longed to go back in time and say it. The fury of unuttered sentences.

I dropped onto the bed and smothered my sobs in my pillow. Why did I let a little turd like that make me descend into this verbal sewer? I was a literary agent. I lived with words. I owned my own business. I spoke with representatives from important publishers and producers, even Paramount and United Artists. Why did I have such killing anger in me? I wanted it surgically removed, burned out with lasers. The unwholesomeness of the apartment wrapped around me like an octopus.

I called my sister. The line was busy. Good thing, I thought. I called Linda and got her answering machine. I couldn't call Louis with something so stupid and unprofessional. Melissa had sided with Bill and was being cool to me. Daniel's address was unknown. Andrea I refused to call.

I took a deep breath and called Dana. We used to call each other frequently in the good old days.

"Valeria! How are you?"

The warmth of his familiar voice made me want to melt in grief and longing.

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"I'm just fine, Dana. We really miss you at the agency, but this isn't a business call, actually." I struggled hard for control.

"Is everything O.K.? Gee, it's great to hear your voice! But you sound upset."

"I'm not upset. Just . . . full of angst as usual." I tried to laugh. "Dana! Pay no attention to me!"

"I've never heard you talk like this before."

"I just got a very strange script, that's all. Work's been kind of tough; we haven't had writers quite like you for a long time. But this script, I'd like you to see it if he sends it to me. His name's Fetch Felix. Or Mitch; he keeps changing it. Know him? No credentials."

"Never heard of him at all." He laughed. "Sounds like Lex Luthor."

"You're right! Well, I could go on and on about this bizarre story he sent me — I'd pay you, of course, to read it — but it's late and. . . ."

"Yes, it is, Valeria, and actually . . . I have a friend here, so I can't talk frankly with you." This last in hushed tones. We had flirted more frankly than I had let on to anyone in the office. Our brief fling had been unprofessional in the extreme, and it had made his decision to leave very awkward for both of us.

"Oh God, I'm so sorry. I didn't know how late it was! Please forgive me!"

"Hey! We're old chums! Let's have lunch next week. We'll talk about the script."

"I'd love to, Dana. Please call me."

"You can bet on it."

"Good-bye! Sleep well!"

"You, too!"

The click of his receiver was just a little too precipitous for comfort. I was hot with embarrassment and confusion.

Then I did a kind of crazy thing.

I called Fetch Felix. Two-hour time difference: it would be ten o'clock in Manhattan, Kansas. I could hear the tranquil burr of the phone; it rang three times before the click of connection. I slammed the receiver down. I was losing my mind.

I got up and went to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. There was a muffled sound of glass shattering in the kitchen.

I stood there for four crawling minutes, frozen to the cold metal of the medicine cabinet. Slowly, I opened the door, crossed the hall, and flipped

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on the light over the sink. I went to the cupboard and opened it. Glass fell out onto the counter, the remains of a tumbler, and I gasped.

"That should have been your head, you whore," I said after a moment.

I gave another gasp.

The dental instrument was back, its talon extended. It was bent at an unnatural angle in the sink, curling up in an arc like a strychnine spasm.

6: *The Fetch*

IT WAS Saturday night, and I had stayed out as long as I could alone. You can't sleep for three days in a motel.

On closer examination and in the light of day, the dental hook turned out to be a fork, still bent. But now I had a new and even more miserable preoccupation. Amazing how when you're already lying in the muck, the world will go out of its way to run over you.

I had had lunch with Linda, who was eager to hear about the latest in the Pritchard serial. I told her about Susie's entrance as a character. I told her I was seeing Dana sometime next week.

She told me that she and Dana were engaged.

"You're what?" I had said after seconds had ticked by. I tried to cover up my shock with an ineffectual laugh. "How long have you been seeing him?"

"Not long; it was a sudden kind of thing. . . ."

"I didn't even know you knew him."

"You introduced us at a party last year."

I knew I couldn't justify my feelings. I had no claims on Dana, but feelings aren't rational. Betrayal and jealousy, those disgusting, forgotten ailments, insisted on bursting out in their undignified way.

"And I told you all this junk about myself, and you never even *mentioned* this important . . . event in your life," I blurted.

"Please, Valeria . . . I suspected you and Dana were. . . ."

"You coward. You make me feel like a fool."

"You're ranting, Valeria."

"Was that you there Thursday night when I called Dana?"

Linda folded her napkin with great deliberation.

"Why don't you see a doctor?"

"Why don't you go to hell?"

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I came back to find that a pipe had burst in the basement. The tub, the kitchen sink, and the toilet were dumping their disgusting, forgotten contents into the laundry room through a hole in the wall. The Warlock's doing, undoubtedly. Downstairs was an excremental horror, and the Prick would probably make me pay for ruining his sewers with my feminine hygiene.

I sat on my bed and looked at my bedroom full of things lit up by my night-light: the clothes and jewelry lying everywhere, the unsent letters scribbled over with hate and self-invective. The unfinished poems, the scattered script of Fetch Felix. I hadn't even bothered to pick them up off the bedspread. My life was a mesh of disconnected things: money badly invested, black words on a white page, the letters separate and lined up like prison bars. I didn't want to hate Linda. She was my best friend, and in repulsing her I had pushed Dana out of my friendship as well. I wanted to go back in time and cut the words out of the air, but now, after the fact, they were as indelible as India ink.

It was Dick's fault. He deprived me of sleep and sanity. His bitch had made me call Dana. Even now the basement was filling up with shit.

When the picture tilted suddenly on the wall, I laughed. I looked at it swinging there, like a parody of a strangled man.

"Go ahead, Warlock. Break my head."

I thought about the picture falling off the wall. I stared so hard at it that halos grew around it, and all other subjects vanished.

"Fall off."

It did. With a crash. Shadows filled the room.

When I was a child, the Vicks VapoRub had fallen off my bedside stand. My parents thought I had pulled it with threads. They always assumed I was lying: hateful beasts. I knew now that it had fallen because something in me had pushed out to touch it. Had pulled out all my underwear in a moment of great self-loathing. It was like a hand behind the forehead. I could feel it touch the concreteness of the walls.

"Move the papers."

I pushed out with that spectral hand. It wasn't hard.

As though wafted by wind down a chimney, the letters and the notes and the narrative of Fetch Felix began to flutter on the bedspread. I felt no fear at all. I was in control.

I thought about the woman in the synopsis, summoning her *fylgja* out

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of twigs and dry leaves. I stared hard at the rippling papers that covered my bed.

I want my *fylgja*, I want my Fetch, I thought. My representative. My agent.

The papers slithered together in one movement onto the floor and began to quarrel like dry leaves whipped by a tiny whirlwind. Quarrel quarrel quarrel, a little funnel of words on white.

I watched the shape as it began to take form on my cotton throw rug: long, heavy, golden; the bright and dark body stretching to its full length on the floor; its coat gaining in brilliance and heaviness; the ringed tail twitching gracefully; the enormous paws flexing, razors springing out and retracting without sound.

It moved its tremendous, indifferent head in my direction — two points of amber glowed out of its Halloween mask. It yawned, the eyes disappearing into slits as it unclosed its shiny coral maw. Yellow incisors an inch and a half long. A feral stink filled the room, sharp and perilous. This was no hallucination.

With a whine that was part rumble, part purr, it got to its feet in a fluid motion of black stripes and crouched. My bed buckled violently with its weight, the wood frame creaking in protest. I backed up against the wall and stared into its slanted eyes and the vivid Rorschach face of my *fylgja*. Great or lesser, wild or domestic, all cats have the same mannerisms: it stretched its massive neck and sniffed curiously at my hair, its black nostrils expanding and contracting audibly. I could feel the tickle of whiskers on my cheeks and smell its carnivorous breath; goose bumps broke out all over me. As if satisfied, it gave another deep whine and dropped down heavily, its huge hooks kneading my blanket in content. Its head towered over me.

There I was, a mortal woman, in bed, cheek to jowl with *Panthera tigris*. No playmate for the ailurophobe.

"Fetch Felix," I whispered, and it looked at me. I pushed out my mental hand; I dared not stroke it with my corporeal one.

"Go catch mice," I whispered.

It gave me a knowing, almost cynical glance. Then it rose, turned ponderously, and leaped off my bed, which sprung up, relieved of its burden. The last I saw of it was the sensuous feline saunter of its black and golden haunches, tail down, as it disappeared around my

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bedroom door and into the dark hallway.

Immediately I sank back against my pillow in a half-faint. All anger and energy had been drained from me, leaving in their place a curious peace. I hated no one; all I wanted was to sleep.

I did. Well into Sunday morning.

7: *Felix*

MONDAY WAS great. It was a beautiful, crisp fall day. Louis was in fine form; we wrote up two important contracts with publishers; the burdens of talent were beginning to feel less heavy; I was exceptionally nice to Bill, and I think he and Melissa were beginning to warm up again.

And the completed script arrived from Manhattan, Kansas. It was brilliant.

"Who is this Mitch Felix?" Louis said. "He's a sleeper."

"I don't know. He doesn't seem to have written anything else."

"He doesn't include his phone number. A damn inconvenience."

"Odd," I said. "New writer."

"You have his query letter; didn't he list his phone number?"

"I can't remember. I think I sent it back to him."

I should have made a photocopy.

At lunch I went to the stationer's and bought the most attractive card I could find for Linda.

> *Dear Linda, Will you ever forgive me for the scene I made in the restaurant this weekend? I feel like such an ass, but more so because I'm afraid I alienated one of my best friends. I've just been really down about the apartment, and other things, but I've decided I'm going to move out, and the decision has made me feel a lot better. You and Dana are two of the most exceptional and gifted people in the world. Don't go out of my life. Invite me to your wedding. Love always, Valeria.*

She didn't respond immediately, but then, I didn't expect her to.

Leaves were all over the lawn in front of my brick house. I swished through them and mounted the steps. Dick came out the front door as

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I approached. He was wearing his business suit.

"Hello, Valeria," he said in his usual guarded way. His enormous eyes were bloodshot behind his horn-rimmed glasses.

"Hello, Dick."

"Did you hear or see anything weird this weekend?"

"No," I said. "Has something happened? Oh! I forgot to tell you! The pipes dammed up. I had to call the plumber. He came out yesterday and said he'd finish the work today. I hope you don't mind; it was an emergency."

"Somebody got into my apartment," said Dick.

"What?? When?"

"Before I came back this morning. The police were here. I tried calling you at work."

"How could . . . ?"

"I don't know. When I got back this morning, the doors were still locked, the windows were shut from the inside, but the whole place was torn to pieces. My entire apartment."

He looked at me as if he thought I were responsible.

"Torn to pieces," I said blankly. "Was anything taken?"

"Nothing. But someone went in there and ripped the hell out of my pillows, my furniture, my records, you name it. There's a lot destroyed."

A tremor had entered his voice.

"You wouldn't've given the key to the house to any of your friends, would you?" he said. He meant — *You wouldn't have done it!*

I got a little indignant.

"Of course not. And even so, I wouldn't have a copy of your key. The only person I know who does is Susie."

"How'd you know her name? How'd you know about Susie?"

"I can't betray a confidence."

"Someone on this block told you?"

"What difference does it make? That's water under the bridge." I winced and thought of the basement.

"Here's the name of the plumber and his number," I said, fishing through my purse. I handed him the assessment. "I'm sorry about your place."

Dick shook his head morosely. "Thanks."

"I'll keep an eye out," I said. "Maybe you'd put window limiters on my windows."

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"I'm putting the storms up tonight."

He went out and got into his Jaguar.

That night I slept heavily. Not a thing stirred in my apartment. Despite the account Dick had given me, which three months ago would have turned me into a blithering maniac, I was tranquil. Even without the help of a Controlled Substance like the Witch.

The plumber fixed the pipes, and commissions started coming in like a high tide. We thrived at work. Meanwhile, I tried to get in touch with this Mitch Felix: we wanted to sell his script, and we already had several producers in mind, and a number of suggestions and emendations. But Felix wasn't listed in the Manhattan directory. This was puzzling and annoying. We wrote him letters. I stopped taking work home and began to unwind a bit. I played the piano. Overhead I could hear Susie's shrieks and sobs, the low, harsh tones of Dick's voice. I put in earplugs.

At the kitchen sink, I saw Susie run out to her car. There was a white patch over her face, and bandages on her arm, as though she had been caught in the brier patch and had ripped her skin. I shuddered, but in five minutes she was out of mind as surely as the diminishing roar of her car was out of earshot. I was tranquil and happy: I had met somebody new. We were in the first stages of a gentle romance: coffees and brunches and a Broadway play. His name was Abe Stern, and he was a psychiatrist. Can you imagine that? Me going out with a shrink! The reviled and avoided race. Most ironic of all was that he was Andrea's brother. The "doctor" in the family. She had introduced us.

Mitch Felix sent us another screenplay. It was witty, dark, intense, insane, and brilliant.

"Send us your phone number." Bill wrote in his letter of reply.

Meanwhile, Abe was giving me marvelous back rubs in my apartment. Why had I been so scornful of psychiatry before?

"The ligaments in your neck are tremendously knotted," he told me, running his strong, clever hands through my hair and over my shoulders. "And yet you're the most relaxed person I've ever met."

"My job is not relaxing," I said. "But you are."

I looked up into his bronzed face, his tawny, handsome eyes.

"You make me feel so happy," I whispered. "You make me feel like a cat. I want to purr."

He had wonderful, nibbling kisses with just the hint of teeth.

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Early that morning I found him sitting up in bed next to me, clutching his bare arms.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah . . . just a dream."

I caressed his shoulder with my hair. "Tell me about it."

"It was purely olfactory. A strong smell. Musky. Are you sure you don't smell something?"

"I don't smell a thing."

"Does the guy upstairs have a big dog or something?"

I frowned. Something disturbed me about this image.

"No," I said. "Was that in your dream?"

"Not exactly. But don't you ever hear the commotion upstairs?"

"What commotion?"

"I've been here twice before, and every night it's like there's a big animal pacing and sniffing around overhead. And growling. Strange sound, like furniture being moved."

I was silent.

"And your landlord. He cries all the time, like a depressive."

"He what?"

"Cries at night. It's a wonder you can sleep through it."

Two weeks after I had sent her my card, Linda called me.

"Dana and I split up," she said leadenly.

"Linda! No! My God, whatever for?"

"We weren't right for each other." Linda started to cry. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she sobbed, and hung up. I drove over to her place in a frenzy.

I was shocked to find that her face was savagely scratched.

"How did this happen?"

"I cut myself."

"That's impossible! You're the most stable person I know."

"Little do you know, then."

"Let me take you to the hospital."

Linda refused. Nor would she come home with me.

"I'm afraid of myself," she wailed. "I didn't know I had so much hatred in me."

"Let me at least spend the night."

Linda told me about her dreams. She was being tormented by teeth.

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"Teeth?" My skin began to prickle just to hear her.

"Yeah. In the dark. Glowing teeth. I can't write anymore," she said. "All I can think about is Dana."

"Why did he leave?"

She shook her head bitterly.

"Why'd you ever tell me about you and Dana?" she exploded. The words bit me like incisors.

My friends were falling out from under me. With heavy apprehension, I called my sister.

"Are you all right?"

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"Everybody that's connected to me is behaving very strangely, as though there were a virus going around."

"Well, are *you* all right?"

"Couldn't be better."

"Sounds like there's a new MAN in your life."

Her tone was unmistakable. If I told Madeline what was happening, she'd find some way to fit in the word "paranoid."

"Never mind," I said, and hung up. I had second thoughts.

When I called again, my brother-in-law answered.

"Ted, is Madeline all right?"

"Madeline has quit her job, Valeria. She hasn't been sleeping well, and she fainted on duty the other night. Nearly killed a baby."

Observing my distress, Abe insisted on cooking dinner for me. He invited Andrea. I hadn't seen her in weeks. She seemed remote to me, and more old-fashioned and hippie than usual. She wouldn't look at me, and went on and on about the vanishing ozone layer.

"It's more important than ever that you wear a sunscreen," she said, about as unbewitching as a bank teller. "Even on cloudy days."

I went into the kitchen to mix myself another drink, and Andrea followed me and got right to the point.

"A third of you is missing," she said. "I can see it in your energy field. You're not all here. You've got to get your strength back and close the jaws of your anger."

Abe took me home early. I was getting the telltale aura of a migraine. I hadn't had one in months. He said it was the change in weather. The

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first snow was only days away. I could feel the onset of menstruation.

'Your sister's creepy."

"Forget her. Andrea's having some difficulties at work."

"I can believe it."

I wouldn't let him come up with me.

"I just have to be alone, Abe." I kissed his anxious face.

For the first time in weeks and weeks, I couldn't sleep. No sign of Dick upstairs. I lay on my stretching block of a bed, eyes staring fiercely into the dark. There was a scratching at my screen.

"Your Warlock is getting out of control," said Dana, clinging to the mesh like a moth. "A third of you is missing." He pressed a book against the window: the jacket design came in and hovered over me; it showed a woman who had muzzled a lion. I shot up and out of the dream and stood there swaying by my bed.

Was Dick upstairs or not? I went to the window and peered through the blinds to see if his car was parked in his open garage.

It was, and draped on top was an ominous figure, striped with shadow. Its tail seemed to beckon me: black bars against flame.

I ran out into the frosty night barefoot, but the fetch was gone.

FETCH FELIX! How could I have forgotten? How could I have slept so long under this invisible burden of talons?

8: *Witch Patrol*

IMAGINE LIVING for a year in bliss: happy, productive, calm, in love — and then a door opens, letting in the cold wind, and someone tells you it was all a dream; get up and face everything terrible that ever happened to you.

"The Eleventh of the Major Arcana is Strength," Andrea told me, and showed me the tarot card. "She's often depicted as a woman closing the jaws of a lion."

"I don't believe this shit. And it was a tiger, not a lion."

"Doesn't matter. Same type. You've got to close its mouth."

"How do I do this?"

"Don't know. How'd you set this spiritual machinery in motion?"

"I was angry."

"Now you'll have to recall. For your own happiness and peace of mind."

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"I don't feel angry anymore. Just tired."

"There have got to be other resources in you."

"Andrea. Who was Dick's brother, and what happened to him?"

"He taught English at Barnard. We don't know what happened to him. I don't think he got tenure."

The doctor and the dentist. No wonder Dick hated me.

I sat on my bed, cross-legged as I had before. I was a woman of resources. I was in control of many things. I possessed many things; I read many things. Out of things, mere scraps of paper, I had engineered art forms, connections, links of benefit to me and my clients and the world of viewers and readers. I had made a mark. Out of scraps of paper and remembered conversations, I had also formed and set my angry emissary loose, and now he had to be caught and muzzled. He was an illegal tenant, and perhaps a shadow of someone else's genius as well. Caught in the woodwork, perhaps he saw an enraged accomplice and telekine in me? No. Dick's brother's anger would not hook me and reel me in. I had anger enough for myself.

What were my resources? Love? Too callow for that. Compassion? Never had to develop it much. Courage? Four years of fending off the horrifying effects of the mind with benzodiazepines.

Invention?

I had, after all, invented the Fetch — with help perhaps. But what could fetch the Fetch?

Invention, my real Witch, was no mere chemical substance. She was a huntress, watchful for genius. Foolishly, she had let her genius get away from her, and her task was to bring him home. She wasn't to kill him. Subdue him only. She would need a club to stun him, a net to throw around him, a whip to hold him at bay. If he ran from her, she would need to pursue. If he charged her, she would need to deflect him. He was brute passion, but she was guile and intelligence. I could see her taking form: the tall, strong limbs; the long red hair pulled back from the strong lines of her face, braided tight against the nape of her neck. A worthy opponent for Fearful Symmetry. Her hands were gloved. Looped at her belt on the right side was a bullwhip. In a pouch on her left was a net. Slung over her shoulder was a hypodermic rifle; for as she was a twentieth-century creation, Strength would not go stalking a tiger she couldn't kill without one. The Witch would tranquilize the Warlock, as she had always

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done. With the net she would bring him home.

She didn't leave me without a melodramatic demonstration of her powers: with a wide-arced swing of her right leg, she knocked my lamp to the floor, and it burst into smithereens. We were plunged into semidarkness. She crouched and leaped to the high ceiling of my bedroom, and hung there suspended by an imaginary exercise bar on which she raised herself, spread out her powerful, little legs in the perfect 180-degree angle, brought them together again, and leaped down. She turned to face me where I cowered on the bed, and she saw the white glimmer of my features against black. Then she was out the door and down the long corridor, following the scent of the prey.

It was a powerful scent, and it spread along the hallway to the living room. It looped circles around the piano; the bright infrared paws of the creature led to the fireplace and up the flue. She slung her rifle on her back, crouched down in the soot, and in an instant she was propelled upward with a single gesture of her gloved hand. Paper and burned creosote flaked away from the wall, which caved in at her touch. She squeezed through the hole, and she was upstairs.

Dick's apartment was dark: sheets covered the furniture. It was a dreary place into which she tracked the soot of her own passage. The footprints of the Fetch were bright and hot against the floorboards, each one the size of a plate. She followed them into the bedroom, where Dick lay sprawled in his bed. A hot stink of animal excrement. The animal was pinning him down. She reached for her rifle, and the Fetch sprang off the bed and evaded her. She spun around and loped after him into the kitchen.

Three people sat around the glass table in August.

"Are you sure you want the apartment?" said the man, "I mean, don't you want to go home and think about it for a while?"

"I have learned from experience," said the tall, smug, red-haired woman, "that one must strike while the iron is hot."

She opened her checkbook and brought out her anvil and hammer.

The other man thrust in between them.

"I wanted the apartment, Dick. It would have been great!"

"Why didn't you tell me earlier? I've already signed the lease!"

"I thought you'd give me first refusal! AAAAAHHH!"

"What dread feet," said the red-haired woman, and smashed the man with her hammer. He collapsed in sparks on the table.

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The Witch was confused. One of them was the Fetch, and he was tricking her. Sharp knives sunk into her shoulder and pulled the flesh away from her bones, and she screamed. The Fetch made a terrible noise like deep machinery grinding together; he had come up behind her, and now he sailed out the window, a rainbow of stripes and shattering glass. She sailed after him, down through the ruddy leaves and the October night air. Fetch hit the glossy top of the Jaguar and rebounded, leaving a dent. Witch followed, her fabricated legs taking up the shock and recoiling gracefully. Fetch galloped around the corner of the house and was gone.

Witch tracked him through the immense bushes in the front yard.

"I don't want to stay here overnight," said the woman, her pinched features grieved. "That bitch makes me nervous."

Bitch Witch Mitch Glitch Pritch.

They sat in their pajamas in the chaise lounge on the porch, clinging to each other. Inside the downstairs apartment, the entire staff of Maynard and Myers Literary Agency stared at them, their noses pressed flat against the pane.

"You should've held out for Frank.

"Maybe I just won't renew her lease," said Dick feebly.

The woman screamed when the Fetch flew up the steps and at them and volleyed off and over the porch railing, gouging their thighs with the claws of his hind feet.

There was bitter sobbing, but Witch was after him, her rifle loaded and ready. Fetch was on the rooftops of the house next door, lit up by a gibbous moon. Witch followed his bloody tracks through the Forests of the Night, dodging chimneys and telephone poles and gasping for breath. He slipped through a hatch door, and she was behind him in two seconds. A waitress screamed, but he was already in the dining room, leaving traces of gouged flesh. It was filled with people. Witch couldn't see him. She crouched and cocked her rifle. He wasn't masquerading as one of the diners; she wouldn't fall for that trick again. He would lunge up at her through the carpet, his claws at her loins.

"You coward," said the woman. "You make me feel like a fool." Hatred and envy had disfigured her otherwise pleasant face.

Strength, in the form of the Witch, did not like to hear the word "coward"; it rattled her, as did the word "fool."

That's when the Fetch struck again, leaping out of the throat of the

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speaking woman, like a small, raving moth that grew in intensity and ferocity. The Witch fell back through a hole in the floor. She landed on her feet in a dim corridor and shrank back to make way for the ponderous thud of the Fetch. He landed, too, on all four paws. They faced each other in a smelly chamber. The Witch shot him in the shoulder, but the needle stuck in the fur and glanced off the skin. The Fetch roared and struck her with his deadly hands across the face. She felt a claw catch in the delicate cartilage of her nostril. Hideous pain almost blinded her, and the Fetch was gone.

Moaning and bleeding, Witch limped after him through the trickling water, hardly pausing to reload the gun. He was streaking down a wet alley now. Car lights cast long, glimmering columns of brightness on the wet concrete; shadows licked at the pockmarked pavement and moved on. Fetch was lunging suicidally at the blank end of a cul-de-sac. Witch pursued him relentlessly. He gave one desperate glance rearward, the sulfurous light from the streetlamps reflecting green in his retinas, and with a great explosion of crumbling brick, he plunged through the wall and into the furnace. Witch followed.

They were flying across a void. Stars threw down their spears; there was another implosion, and below her, Fetch dropped down onto the sleeping figure of a woman in a disheveled bed that collapsed in the great commotion of snapping wood. Her screams were earsplitting.

Witch landed at the foot of the broken bed and dispatched volley after volley of numbing needles into the flank of the animal. Roars and shrieks rocketed from the walls, and still the Witch shot at him. Gradually, his grip on the screaming woman's neck relaxed; his claws peeled out of her breasts; his legs began to tremble. An animal, beautiful in his natural state untouched by human fantasy and fear, began to wilt; the body with its magnificent pelt of black lines drooped twitching on its side. He growled, a pale version of his roar, and his feet kicked in a senile palsy. He tried to lift his massive head, failed, his eyes nicitating blindly, and he sank back.

Then he dissolved into bloody pieces of paper.

The Witch wept in relief. The woman on the bed was in a coma. Her hair streamed out like fire across the pillow. The Witch threw herself upon the woman's cold, naked body and embraced and kissed her, weeping. Their blood mingled. Something fell away from the window,

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something that was stuck and freed itself.

"Please," breathed the Witch, a cool current in the unconscious woman's ear, "don't die, Fetch Felix!"

9: *The Ten of Swords*

ICE ABOVE me; the distant sound of commotion. I was made of ice cream, and I sank to the bottom of my parents' pool. Hands reached down to fish me up and pull me through that implacable wall of ice against which my head knocked painfully. A shattering sound; my lips were on fire — or were they frozen; I couldn't tell — and I emerged into noise and bright lights, as powerless to move as Gulliver, secured by a thousand pins and needles.

"Kill," I kept saying, my leathery tongue working heavily around an obstruction in my mouth. The dentist had filled it with novocaine, and the word came out as "cull." I rolled my dried-up eyes, and the apartment rolled around me; this was vertigo to top all others. The Peruvian wall hanging — somehow I was in the living room — the giddy tomb dogs, the beveled mirror, the kaleidoscope from Greenwich Village, my *National Geographic* magazines piled in the corner, and all the manuscripts and opened letters and bills and sheets of music made a whirling dervish around me as though caught in a tornado. The pillows on the couch were shredded, and the fragments of the Chinese punch bowl turned their jagged teeth to the ceiling. This fact wiggled through, but I wasn't in the mood to react.

People and their voices: Dick's dentist head floated into view. I could hear Andrea being peremptory, and there were other voices, strange voices; a flashing red strobe outside licked the walls rhythmically. They bent over me, these strange men and women, their hands on my wrists, on my eyelids, their bright little lights in my eyes, their needles in my veins.

"Have any idea how much of this was left?"

"Judging from the prescription date, as much as five milligrams. Unless she's been saving them."

"Good thing she's a big woman."

The brown bottle, emptied of the Witch. Her ten swords pinned my limp figure to the floor.

"Thwwwwick!" A strange man removed a sword. They all took turns.

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"Mother," I said grossly, and they took me by the neck and stuck their tentacles down my nose and throat: pseudo-Cronenberg. A vibrating sound, and the Fetch, the Witch, and the Warlock came up into a kidney dish. So much for Strength.

Later — when Louis came to see me and was introduced to Madeline, who, sick of NICU, had quit her job and flown up to be with me this week and help me find a new apartment; after Abe had left behind his bright roses along with his tenuous commitment on my front porch; and after Andrea had consoled me and said that I had resources I hadn't dreamed of, that Strength had not betrayed me, that the beast's maw must be held shut for a lifetime, and that was the challenge — we had a conversation about Felix.

"Take a rest," said Louis. "We can muddle on for a while."

"No, there's work to do." I stirred listlessly on the couch. "There's money in that script."

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"We can file Felix. He's an amateur."

"You really think so?"

I would tell him the truth about the shadowy Fetch Felix — my own reduplication. Later, perhaps.

Meanwhile, I learned what Louis had been told: that I'd been assaulted in my apartment, and rather than call the police, I'd overdosed myself on Ativan, a coping mechanism and an accident, NOT attempted suicide; that Dick had heard my moans, broken in, and discovered me, called the paramedics, and saved one of my nine lives; that the intruder was not to be found, but he was presumed to be the one who had totaled Dick's apartment, and for this reason, Dick was suspect. I was not pressing charges, and neither was Dick.

Maybe they even believed this story of theirs.

Until they were ready — until *I* was ready to find in it my own true narrative and a way to break it to them credibly — I would abide by it.

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 53

In the March issue, we asked you to write book cover copy that makes it clear the person responsible had read nothing but the title, and misunderstood even that.

We had good response and an enjoyable time reading through the entries. Interesting that a number of you see a comparison between Tolkien's THE TWO TOWERS and the World Trade Center . . .

FIRST PRIZE

THE ARMAGEDDON RAG: It looked like an innocent Handiwipe, but it was the Devil Incarnate!
THE MOON IS A HARSH MISTRESS: Nightly he admired her from afar, but when he took her for a lover there was hell to pay.
THE SMALL ASSASSIN: His mission, to penetrate enemy lines — by crawling through their legs! (And don't miss the stunning sequel, LITTLE HEROS)
THE FEMALE MAN: "I'm my own best friend," she told her family. But they were afraid she liked herself a little bit too much.

— Marc Laidlaw
San Francisco, CA

SECOND PRIZE

STARS IN MY POCKET LIKE GRAINS OF SAND: Glamour, seduction and scandal in the life of a top Hollywood talent agent.
PRINCE OF BLOOD: The shocking inside story of a Mafia hitman.
GRASS: Understanding the '60s through the journal of a flower-child.

— Jane R. Hansen
Chanhassen, MN

RUNNERS UP

I HAVE NO MOUTH AND I MUST SCREAM: The heart-warming story of a teenage girl's struggle to become a cheerleader, despite her unique deformity.
THE DISPOSSESSED: One tenant's fight against the New York Housing Authority.
THE POSTMAN: Read this newly abridged edition of James M. Cain's classic tale of a drifter, a beautiful woman and her older husband.

— David I. Lewis
Silver Springs, MD

WE HAVE ALWAYS LIVED IN THE CASTLE: A gentle memoir by a member of the Royal Family.
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And, as always, we'll have our usual mix of columnists, cartoons, and special features.

Future issues will contain a strong science fiction story by *Bradley Denton*, a look at three wizards by *John Morressey*, and a stunning novelette by new writer *Ian MacCleod*. The future also holds stories by Nebula-award winners *Geoffrey A. Landis* and *Pat Murphy*, as well as *F&SF* regulars *Ray Aldridge*, and *Dean Whitlock*. Don't miss an issue!

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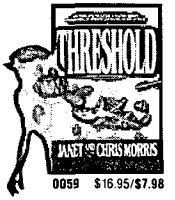

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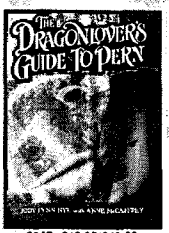

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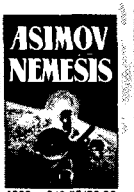

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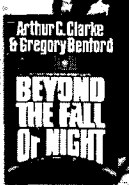

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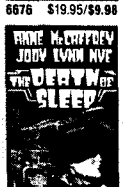

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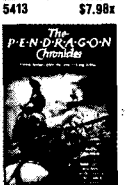

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